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FALL OF DUTY?
Can Advanced Warfare put Call Of Duty back on top?
DRAGON AGE
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Inside BioWare's battle plan to conquer the next-gen RPG war
EXPOSING EPIC GAMES
Future plans for the gaming powerhouse exclusively revealed
HIGHLIGHTS
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Microsoft


CALL OF DUTY
ADVANCED WARFARE


HALO
THE MASTER CHIEF COLLECTION




XBOX ONE




BioWare. What's your initial reaction to that word? What's your immediate gut feeling? You may smile as you recall memories of wooing Morrigan, HK-47 calling everyone meatbags or interrupting Garrus when he's in the middle of some calibrations. Then again, you may remember *Dragon Age's II* attempt to set an entire RPG in one town or the abomination that was *Mass Effect 3*'s ending, with both fiascos pinned on BioWare's purchase by EA altering the studio for the worse. BioWare finds itself trapped between passionate fans and hypercritical forums ready to pounce on the smallest of slip-ups as evidence of the grandest of conspiracies. Sadly, this position isn't a unique one for a modern games studio, which is what makes *Dragon Age: Inquisition* such an important title.

It's going to be huge for those who love RPG adventures – clearly – but *Dragon Age: Inquisition* carries just as much weight for the reputation of BioWare. This will be the studio's first console release since the *Mass Effect 3* debacle and also since co-founders Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk departed. Is *Dragon Age: Inqusition* the redemption BioWare is looking for and proof that the studio hasn't lost its way, as some grouchy corners of t'internet proclaim? We'll know soon enough whether BioWare can once again become our favourite studio on the Citadel.

RyanKing

Ryan King
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF


7.62 MM
SCOPE
PHALANX
PATRIOT
100
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120 MM
LGM
SMOKE

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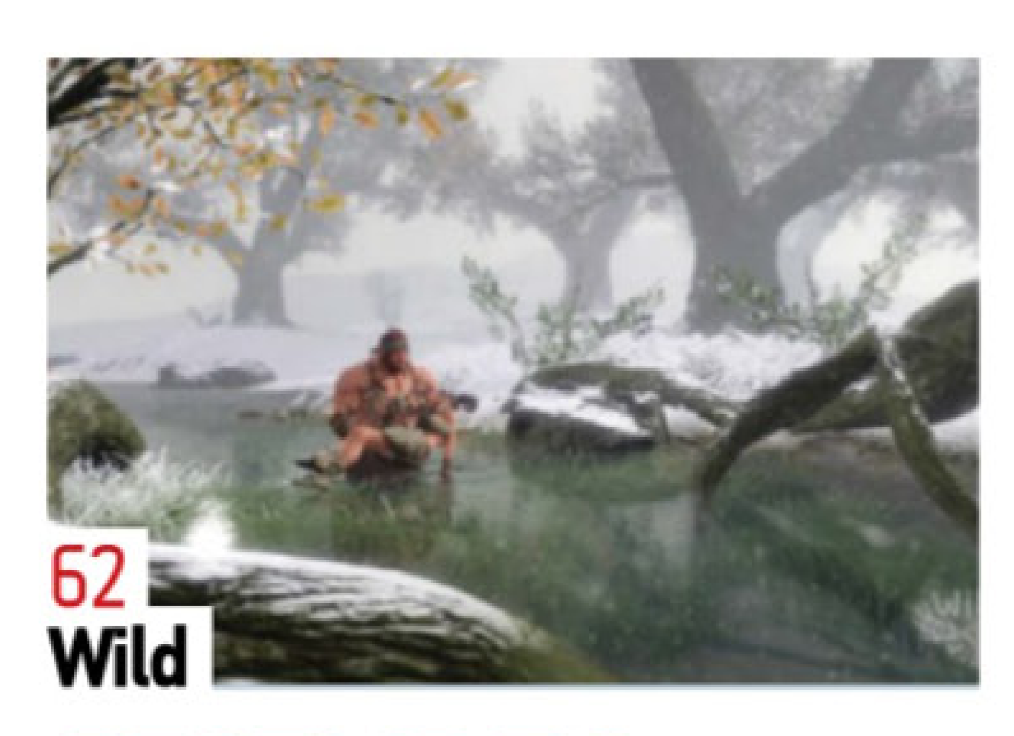
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The New Dawn Of Dragon Age

We take a deeper look at BioWare's ambitious open world intentions with Dragon Age: Inquisition

(WE'RE STILL WAITING…)

Why next-gen isn't here yet

→ It's been just under a year since we got hold of our Xbox Ones and PS4s, yet nothing really seems to have changed in the industry. Are we due for a massive industry change, or have we hit a wall as far as innovation is concerned? **games™** investigates



Before the release of *Watch Dogs*, we were all expecting Ubisoft to release a game with dynamic weather, where the streets of Chicago were flush with dynamic traffic, where pedestrians packed the pavement, where everything and anything could be hacked and interacted with. It was supposed to announce the arrival of the 'next-gen', and vindicate the early adopters of PS4 and Xbox One. When it was released, though, it didn't really do anything new – you could even argue it was overshadowed by what *GTA V* had done on the last generation some five months earlier.

So where is the 'next-gen?' Even platform exclusives like *Ryse: Son of Rome* or *Killzone: Shadow Fall* have done little to really take advantage of the specific hardware the PS4 and Xbox One has to offer. Are we at the stage where the creativity in gaming has hit a wall and we're just going to have to rely on better graphical fidelity to define our new hardware as we go forward? Michał Krzemiński, senior art producer at CD Projekt RED, doesn't seem to think so. "There's no one specific thing that next-gens allowed us to do," he explains, when we ask him about the difference between developing games for the current- and last-generation, "there's a whole ton of them. Essentially, the games you make on newer platforms can look mind-blowing – at CD Projekt RED we've managed to get seamless gameplay with no loading screens because almost everything is streamed during gameplay, cutscenes are all pre-loaded. That, in turn, allows us to add visual effects unavailable to us previously because of performance issues and so on, so the list of what next-gen allows us to do is huge. In-game, everything comes together and constitutes a giant, lush open world with a myriad of things to do; quests, adventures, monster hunts, events and so on and it all happens seamlessly."



Above Perhaps *Assassin's Creed: Unity* – which has been built from the ground up on current-gen technology – will scratch that next-gen itch we've been developing over the last year. Ubisoft promises 'next-gen starts here' after all.

THE GAME IN QUESTION, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, was pushed back from its intended launch of autumn 2013 to February 2015, citing fine-tuning of graphical elements and bug-hunting as the reason for the delay. We found that interesting – *The Witcher 3* looks set to be a game that delivers on the next-gen promise, an open-world game taking advantage of the upgraded RAM and processing power of the new consoles, a watershed moment for the generation. Yet it's been pushed back – could that perhaps signify that the new generation of consoles launched before the developers of the world were ready for them?

"Well, [next-gen development] has been a winding road", reveals Jens Matthies, creative director at MachineGames. "We started with the older generation [dev kits] because the new consoles weren't announced yet, but then as soon as they were revealed, we started migrating production over to the new hardware. So we're building for the new platforms and it was another team's job to port the game we're making back to the old hardware." It could be, then, that the availability of the consoles' development kits was so

DATA STREAM → AMAZON BOUGHT TWITCH FOR OVER $1 BILLION AFTER GOOGLE BACKED OUT

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Your guide to the essential stories

> "There are over ten platforms that are viable for developers to make their games on. I can't even wrap my head around owning two"
>
> Nathan Vella, Capybara Games

close to the actual launch of the hardware that the majority of games we've seen over the last year are cross-gen because the bulk of the development for them took place on last-gen hardware.

"I don't think there's any difference between our core game on any of the platforms it's launching on", adds Gary Napper of Creative Assembly, explaining *Alien: Isolation*'s cross-gen launch. "As a game designer, the core experience always comes first to me, before worrying about things you can add for each platform or how you can take advantage of platform-specific stuff. So the core game is the same; there's no removed behaviour from the AI or anything. The only difference is the graphical quality and fidelity."

"The transition [between generations] is never easy", agrees Joe Khoury, producer of Eidos Montreal's *Thief*. "It's important for us that the player has that same high-quality experience across all platforms. But [for Xbox One and PS4], we pushed the envelope on visuals, for example, on loading times, on streaming, on a bunch of more technical features that allow the whole experience to be a little more quick than the limitations you had on [last-gen consoles]. At the same time, the basic mechanics – the feel of the game – is the same on both current- and last-gen consoles."

Above *Evolve* certainly has the graphics to designate it as a next-gen game, but we're hoping the AI powering the monster (when it's not played by a human…) sets it apart from its last-gen competitors.

SO ALTHOUGH THE new wave of games have more refined visual fidelity and can load assets from the disc faster, we're still not seeing any particular advances in the kinds of games we play, or the immersive experiences they can offer. It could be argued that because publishers are insistent on making games that can be sold to the widest audience, we're seeing Xbox One and PS4 titles feel a little diluted – gameplay and core mechanics are being held back by the processing power of the Xbox 360 and PS3, because developers don't want to take anything away from consumers who opt to buy last-gen versions of their games. But with announcements coming in every month or so about games appearing in late-2015 still seeing a last-gen release (*Rise Of The Tomb Raider* will launch on Xbox One and Xbox 360), how long is it





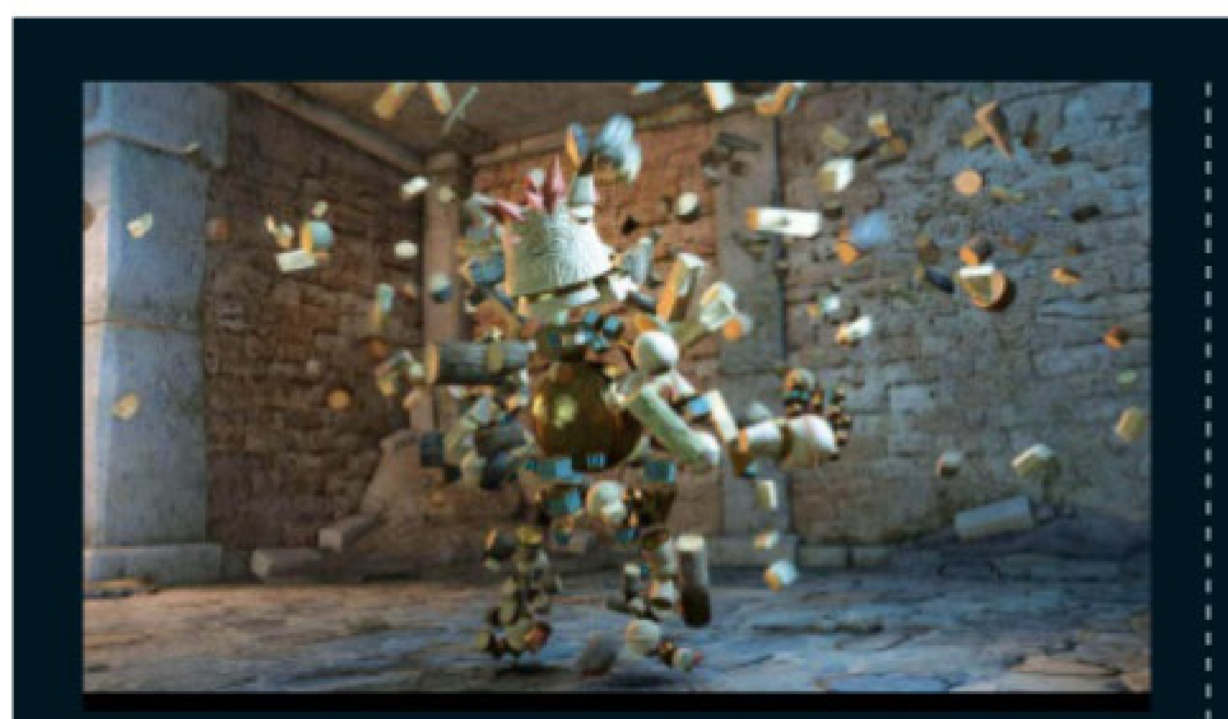
Left Will *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* be to the PS4 what *Guns Of The Patriots* was to the PS3?

DDOS ATTACKS HAVE BEEN RESPONSIBLE FOR RECENT OUTAGES ON XBOX LIVE AND PSN



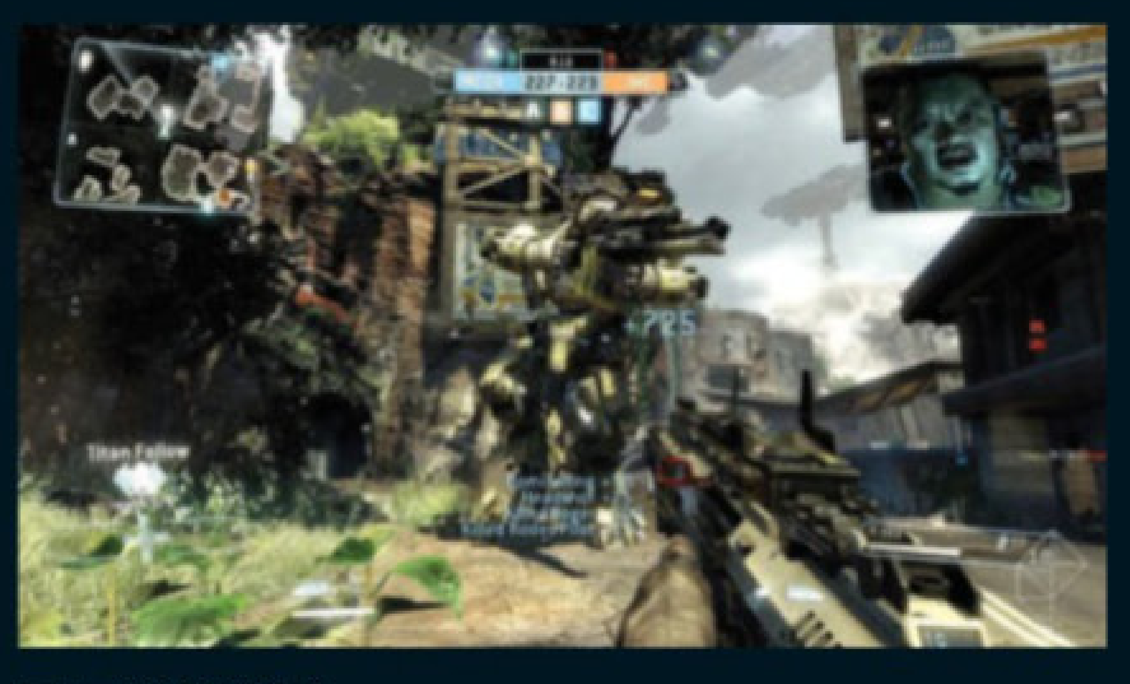
THIS GENERATION'S BIGGEST LET-DOWNS (SO FAR)

This time a year ago, we were rubbing our hands in anticipation – the next generation was almost here! It was almost time to throw away our 360s and PS3s and bask in the warm glow of gaming's new saviours… so where did it all go so wrong?



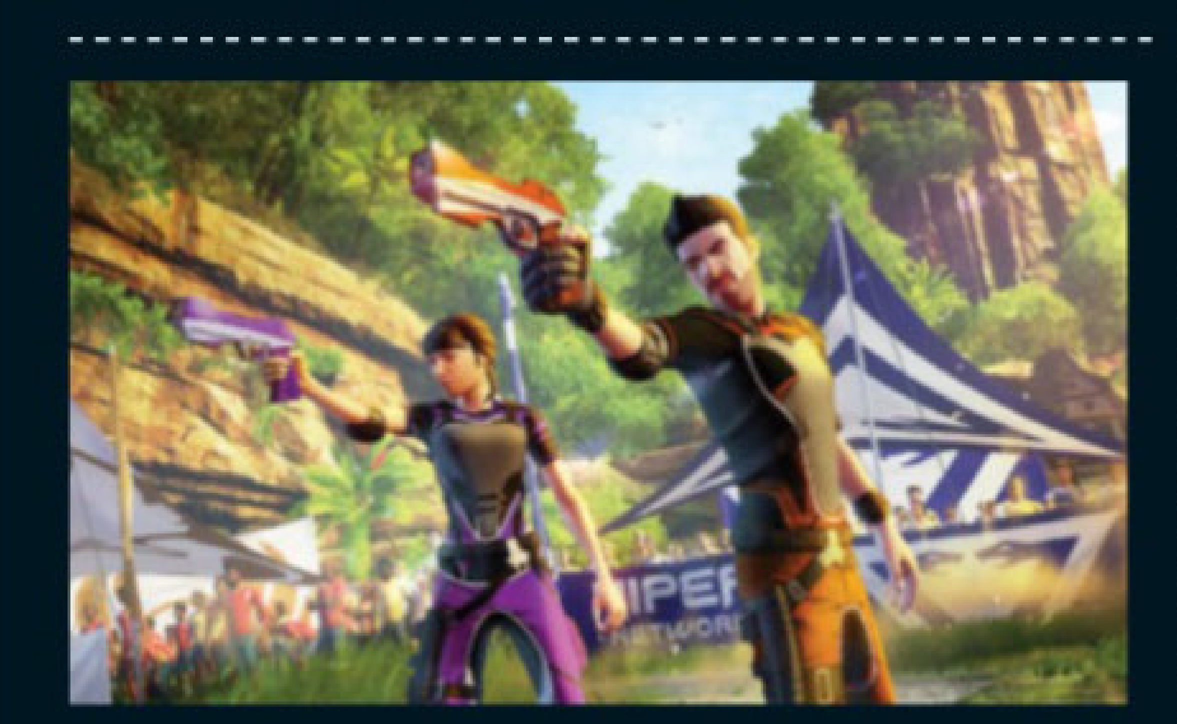
KNACK

COMING FROM THE brilliant mind of Mark Cerny and standing tall as one of Sony's few (but supposedly glorious) platform exclusives, we were pretty excited about *Knack*. All those independently moving bits and pieces, mixed in with a platformer that channelled *Crash Bandicoot*? What a promise. Sadly, the game was less than impressive and didn't really do anything we couldn't have seen on the PS3…



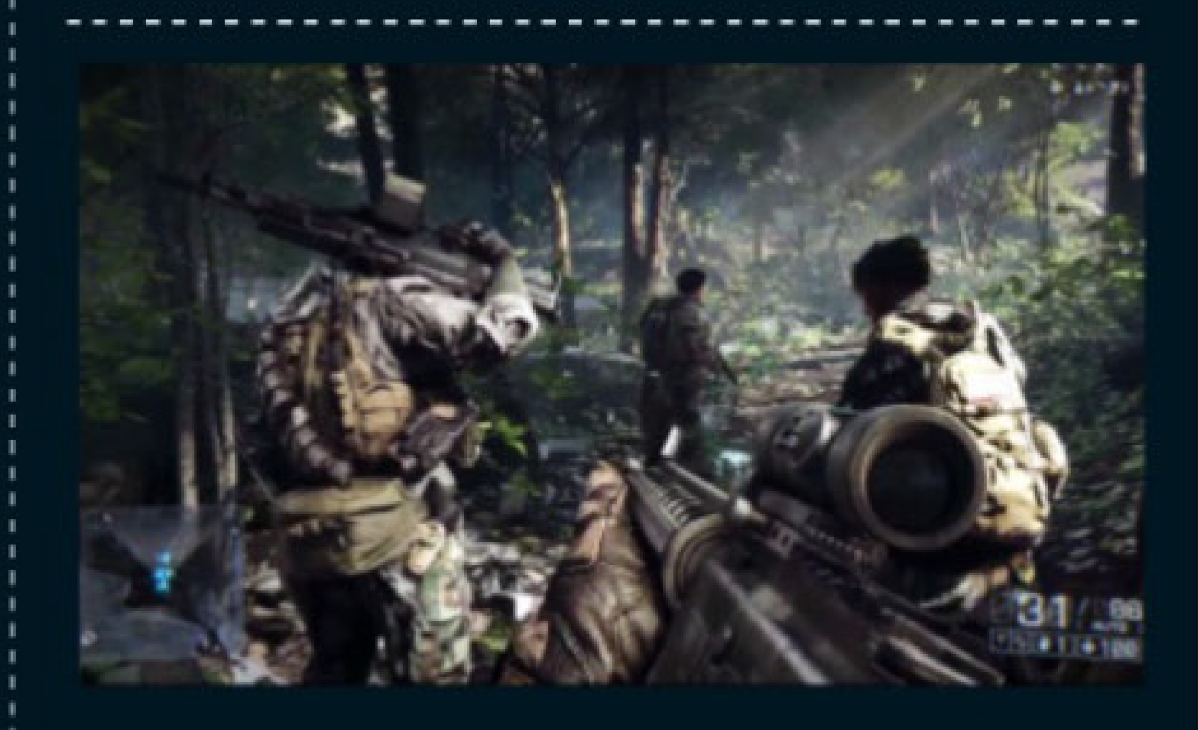
TITANFALL

WHILE IT IS a phenomenal shooter that quickens the pace of the traditional FPS, it's nowhere near as anarchically free-flowing as the hype during the game's release window led us to believe. Once the dust settled and we had time to take a hard look at the game, aside from its graphical fidelity, it didn't break too much new ground. Perhaps the multiplatform *Titanfall 2* will live up to its predecessor's promises.



KINECT SPORTS RIVALS

KINECT 2.0 WAS supposed to be the peripheral you never knew you needed, but Microsoft has already U-turned on its decision to ship every console with the motion-tracking device. The new editions coming out this winter don't even have the option to ship with Kinect. The final nail in its coffin could well have been *Kinect Sports Rivals*, which proved Kinect wasn't the dream machine Microsoft promised us it would be.



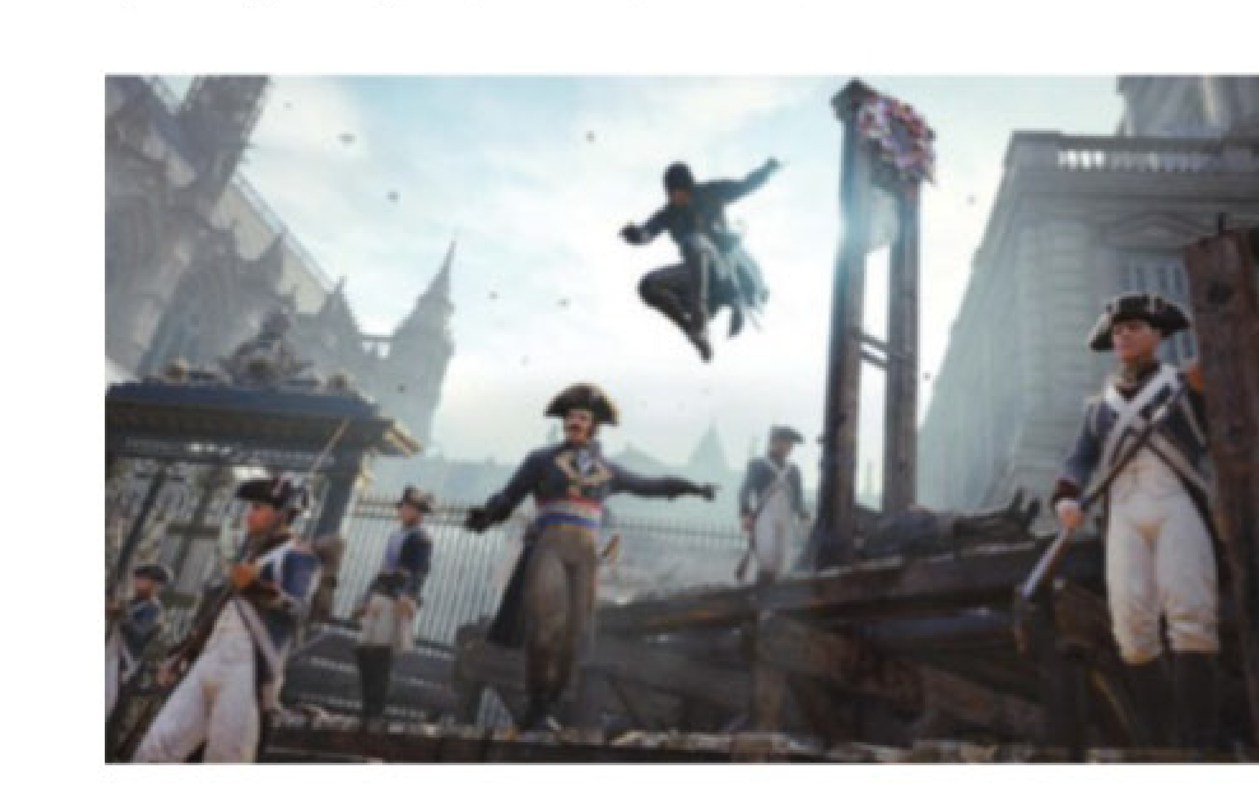
BATTLEFIELD 4

IT WAS BROKEN. We trust DICE and we appreciate the games it makes, but *Battlefield 4* was a buggy mess at launch. It may have been because the studio was rushing to hit the launch window of the new consoles, but still – it's no excuse, really. Many gamers were relying on *Battlefield* to show them the power of their new consoles and were left sorely underwhelmed.



going to be before we see developers really commit to the 'definitive next-gen experiences' we were promised a year ago?

"There is so fucking much going on right now", suggests Nathan Vella of Capybara Games and The Indie Fund when we ask him, "between Mac, Linux, PC, iOS, Android, PS4, Xbox One, the Wii U, the 3DS, the Vita and previous-gen – along with microconsoles – there are over ten platforms that are viable for developers to make their games on. Ten of them. I can't even wrap my head around owning two." This is the most saturated the industry has been with regard to platform availability – it could be argued that because developers are still more au fait with last-gen consoles, studios are more confident developing games for older platforms than gamble on the new. Some studios have even stated they're only releasing on last-gen to carry on the legacy of games that found success on the older platforms, or to finish up 'last-gen sagas' (cases in point: *Dark*



DATA STREAM → CAPCOM WILL BE RELAUNCHING ITS OLDER FIGHTING GAMES IN JAPANESE ARCADES



> "We want to be the best engine for every platform, and that's a big challenge"
>
> James Golding, Unreal Engine

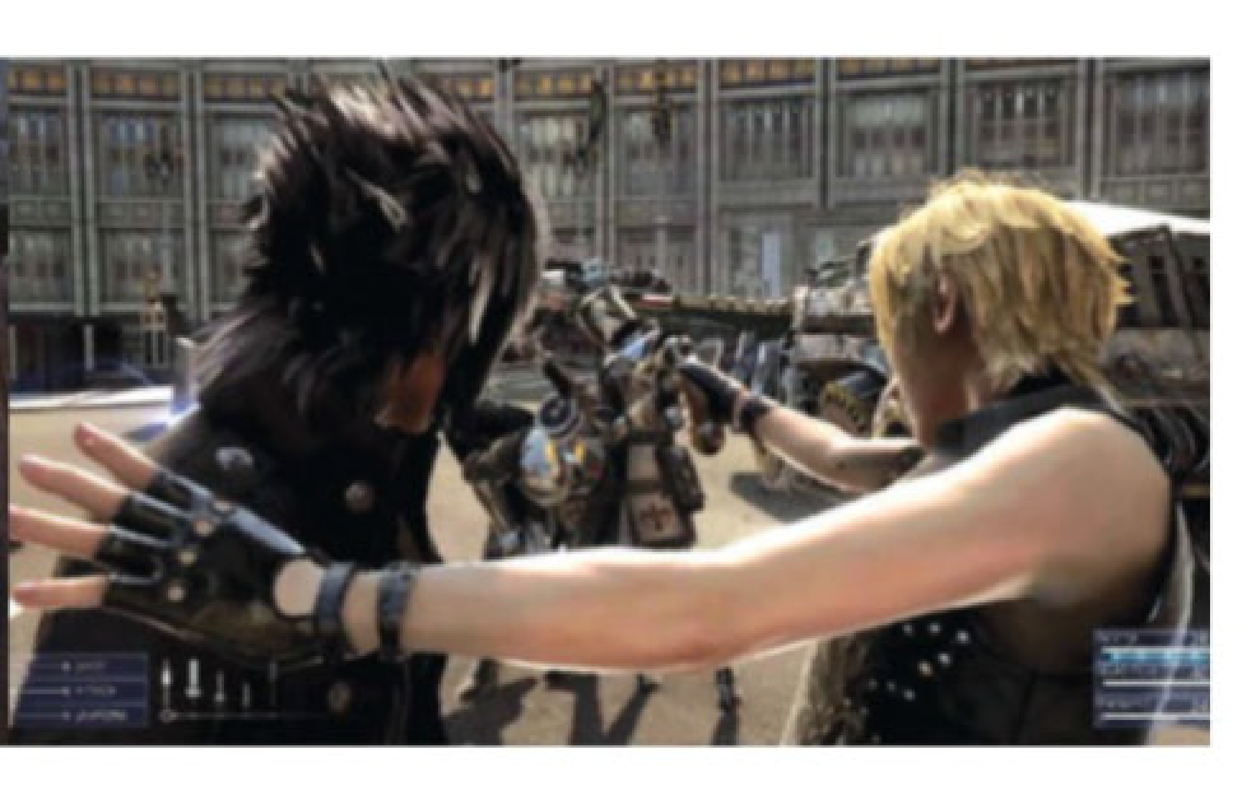
Souls II, *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow 2*, *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel*).

AS WE SEE more developers making their own engines that will extract the best from the new machines, we're sure we'll see more innovative games grace the shelves of gaming stores (or the digital shelves of PSN and XBLA). For now, many developers are relying on platform agnostic engines though – engines that are functional and easy-to-use, but aren't fully compatible with all the Xbox One and PS4's new features just yet.

"A big reason people use cross-platform engines is so [developers] don't have to worry too much about the platform", explains Unreal's lead programmer James Golding, "but [as engine-builders] we also have to find a way to get the most out of each platform. I mean, there are platforms that have their own specific traits – whether that's Kinect on Xbox One or touchscreen on mobile or the DualShock 4 on PS4.

"But in using a cross-platform engine, you're not limiting yourself to anything specific, so finding an engine that does what you could do on a single platform is difficult. With *Unreal 4* and our cross-platform capabilities, that is something we are still working on – we want to be the best engine for every platform, while also working on every platform. That is a big challenge, and we are aware that we need to keep pushing that, and it keeps us on our toes."

If the likes of Unreal Engine can admit that it's not quite ready to produce generation-defining games just yet, what does that say about the general state of console gaming at the moment? Much like with any generation, it says that it will take time for developers to orientate themselves within this new hardware market, take stock of exactly what can be done (and how to go about doing it) and then – hopefully – we will see some truly jaw-dropping games surface around the end of next year, when developers have had ample chance to spend a decent amount of time developing games that were born on and wholly made for this generation's hardware.





Above Square Enix's *Agni's Philosophy* tech demo showed us the kind of next-gen graphics we could look forward to more than two years ago in a real-time tech demo… so why aren't they here yet?

DON'T LOOK BACK IN ANGER

> LAST-GEN HASN'T GIVEN UP JUST YET WITH THESE TITLES STILL TO COME…



PERSONA 5

THE FOLLOW UP to Atlus' ground-breaking *Persona 4 Golden* promises to target gamers who are 'unsatisfied with their lives.' Huh.



ASSASSIN'S CREED: ROGUE

LAST-GEN ONLY, Ubisoft Sofia is filling the gap between *Unity* and *Black Flag* with its own take on the *Assassin's Creed* universe.



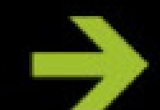
BORDERLANDS: THE PRE-SEQUEL

WE'RE CERTAIN WE'RE going to see a numbered sequel to *Borderlands* on next-gen soon, but until then we have *The Pre-Sequel* to enjoy.



ESCAPE DEAD ISLAND

A CEL-SHADED spin-off from the fledgling franchise, *Escape Dead Island* replaces the action-horror focus of the first game with survival mystery elements.


FIRAXIS IS HOSTING ITS OWN GAMES CONVENTION, FIRAXICON, THIS MONTH IN MARYLAND, USA


(THE CLOUD'S SILVER LINING)

PS4 Vs Xbox One: The Streaming War Begins

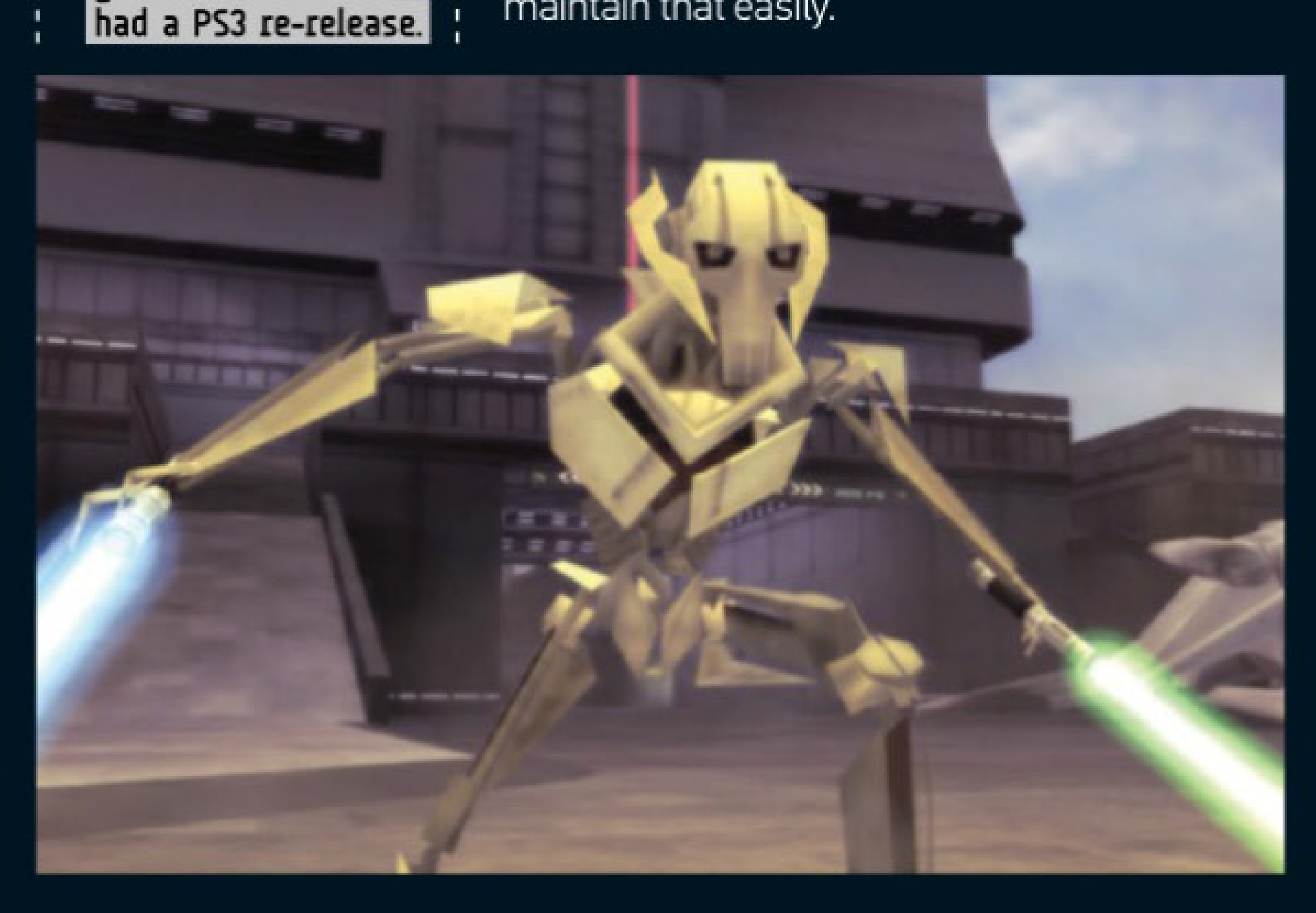
→ With the PS Now beta in full swing and Microsoft and EA's own streaming service on its way, we take a step back, compare the services and examine the origin of these business models

Sony recently soft-launched its PS Now initiative over in the States – an interactive cloud-based service that allows you to rent games and stream them directly to your Bravia TV, Vita, PS3, PS4 or PlayStation TV. It aims to be a pretty comprehensive service – the beta stage of PS Now only allows gamers to stream PS3 games to their devices, but in the future, Sony plans to pump PS1, PS2, PS3 and Vita titles direct into your home. It's the open, cloud-based service we were promised at E3 two years ago when this generation was starting to take a more defined shape amid the changing landscape that made up the games industry.

Following the success of media-streaming services like Netflix, it makes sense for Microsoft and Sony to follow suit and offer their substantial back catalogues to gamers who may have missed out on the games on offer before, or who haven't got the means to play their physical versions any more. The thing is, the PS Now business model is so far more reminiscent of the famously ill-fated Blockbuster stores rather than the admirable Netflix methodology.

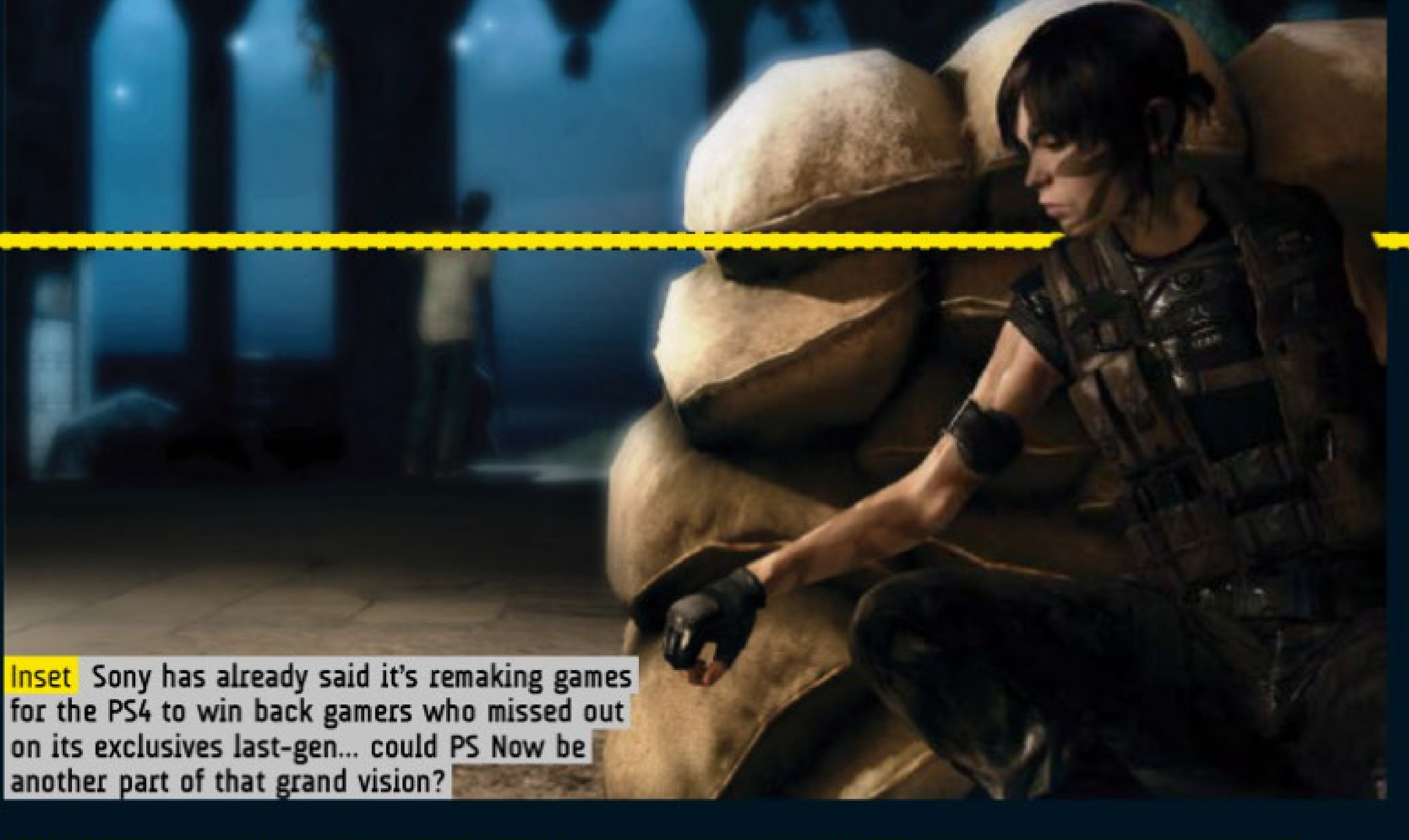
It's clear that the PS Now business strategy is emulating the inflated pricing structure that you'd have once found in physical rental stores: rather than selecting a title from a virtual shelf and playing it until your overall subscription runs out, PS Now asks for one-off payments for every few hours played: the likes of *Metal Gear Solid 4* can be rented for four hours at a cost of $4.99, for example, while *Dead Rising II* can be rented for seven days at $5.99 and the likes of Catherine can be trialled for 30 days in return for shelling out $7.99.

Bearing in mind that the reason the renting structure for movies was so popular for so many years was because of their relatively short digestion time, it seems outright bizarre to us to offer a game like *Metal Gear Solid* for rent at $5 a go when you could just go out and pick up the disc second-hand for a little more money. The service also requires a 5MB/s minimum connection to the internet: something a lot of British players can't maintain that easily.



Below Hopefully PS Now will see PS2 games that haven't had a PS3 re-release.

→ CRYSTAL DYNAMICS DIDN'T MEAN TO 'CAUSE CONFUSION' ON RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER'S XBOX ONE EXCLUSIVITY



Inset Sony has already said it's remaking games for the PS4 to win back gamers who missed out on its exclusives last-gen... could PS Now be another part of that grand vision?



Inset If PS Now is a dedicated service to the whole PlayStation history, we could see some lost gems like *Digimon World* (pictured) re-validated for modern gamers.

Inset Where EA Access will give players the freedom to play games like *Battlefield 4* at will, we wonder how comprehensive the service will be: will it go back generations? Will it include new releases? Probably not, to be honest.

> "Sony declined to be a part of EA's programme, most likely because it didn't want to cannibalise its own market"

EA recently outlined its own streaming initiative, though – EA Access, a subscription-based service that falls in line more with Netflix's philosophy than Sony's and it's a service unique to the Xbox One. For a one-off payment of $30, EA Access gives players the option to stream games as frequently and for as long as they like. While the service is thinner (we wonder how much EA will populate the store with older-generation games as the service grows, though), it also offers discounts on EA's upcoming games – 10% off *Dragon Age: Inquisition* being the first enticing carrot.

Sony declined to be a part of EA's programme, most likely because it didn't want to cannibalise its own market, but back when Sony claimed PS Now would shape the way we consume games in the new generation, we all thought we'd see something much more in line with the value offered in PS+. For seemingly the first time since the new consoles launched, it seems Microsoft has the more attractive option in EA Access from a purely consumer point-of-view: we'd rather pay $30 a year for an all-you-can-eat buffet than $4 every time we get a bit peckish.

This is by no means the final form of Sony's service, though. The company outlined that the beta is purely to test the waters and gauge reception to how consumers react; everything about PS Now in its current form is fluid. It seems to us like a slow effort to break everything Sony-owned down into digestible digital content – assimilating everything into the cloud.

We wouldn't be surprised if one of the dominant features of this generation ended up being backward compatibility in the wake of these new services: Sony already have the upper hand there, having developed so many of its previous games in in-house studios. If Microsoft wants to level the playing field, it'll have to work out a way to bring third-party titles onto its console platform – offering more than just EA games as a lure to bring people to its console. Either way, as consumers, it's us that benefit: we could be seeing a situation in a year's time where even new releases come included in the price of a subscription, and gamers could end up getting as much bang for their buck as film lovers do with Netflix.



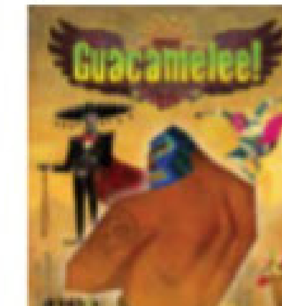
Inset EA Access has great potential to be a collection of the publisher's best releases, but we're a little cautious that it'll end up being nothing more than a sports-game catalogue

THE PRICE WE PAY

→ We've compiled a small list of the comparative charges you're likely to see through PS Now, set against how much you're likely to pay for each game new and pre-used, so you can decide if these new services offer value for money or not...



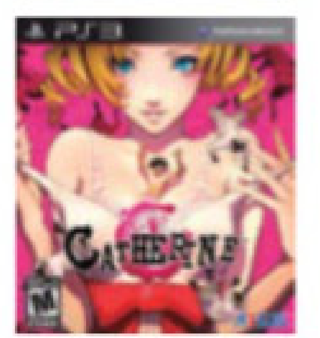
FINAL FANTASY XIII-2
- PS NOW PRICE: $4.99 PER 4 HOURS
- USED PRICE: $8
- NEW PRICE: $18



GUACAMELEE!
- PS NOW PRICE: $2.99 PER 3 HOURS
- USED PRICE: (DIGITAL ONLY)
- NEW PRICE: $15



FAR CRY 3
- PS NOW PRICE: $5.99 FOR 4 HOURS
- USED PRICE: $11
- NEW PRICE: $18



CATHERINE
- PS NOW PRICE: $7.99 PER 30 DAYS
- USED PRICE: $10
- NEW PRICE: $18



UNCHARTED 3: DRAKE'S DECEPTION
- PS NOW PRICE: $4.99 PER 4 HOURS
- USED PRICE: $5
- NEW PRICE: $14


1080P RESOLUTION FOR THE WITCHER 3? IT'S 'NOT SET IN STONE' ADMITS DEVELOPERS CD PROJEKT RED


(DON'T BETA ROUND THE BUSH)

This Is Your Destiny

→ After dominating the Xbox and the Xbox 360's exclusive library with the Halo franchise, Bungie cut ties with Microsoft and set its sights on multi-platform supremacy. In the wake of Destiny's impressive launch, we sat down with the director of production, Jonty Barnes, to discuss how the beta shaped Bungie's Destiny…

The beta was a resounding success – was there anything that players did during the week it was live that surprised you?

Jonty Barnes: We didn't anticipate, as much as we wanted it to be true, that there'd be such an even spread of the class choices. We designed them that way but you never really know until you've got such a large audience: it was very even. That was one thing. The enthusiasm of emotes is out of control – the dance party was great and I found some great videos, but we made this stylistic choice because people *think* they want to chat but they actually don't as a default position. We don't want to spoil the tone and atmosphere of the story we're telling in our own environments in *Destiny*, so we made chat elective, going into the Fire Team. I think that has resulted in greater enthusiasm for emotes and it's also resulted in us also being much clearer on how we get people to talk together when they do elect to do that, because we couldn't be clearer about that. Other than that it's the kind of things you'd expect – we found the hand cannon in competitive multiplayer wasn't quite as punchy as we wanted it to be in terms of effectiveness. We found – well, we kind of knew, but we didn't know what the scale of the issue was – that the Interceptor was so strong and powerful that we made a pretty drastic change to that in terms of [balance]. We levelled the playing field.

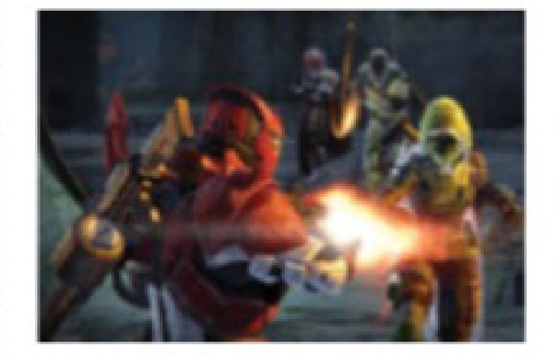
So you managed to make updates to the game on the fly?

I don't know if you noticed, but at one point we kicked everyone into orbit, and then made a very subtle update to a bunch of statistics. As far as [the players] were concerned it was the beta, so we could do that kind of behaviour with them, and they just went straight back into an activity and lived with that. But things had changed a little bit – it's nice that we can just do that like that, server side, because all the activity's there, live. That was great, proving out that deployment technology. Then of course we really messed around right at the end – we said 'What would happen if half our servers die? If we can only do so much at once?' – we put the queue on and we had loads of people in the queue, we saw that everyone who wasn't in the queue was playing the game as always, having a good experience, and everybody in the queue knew exactly where they were. It was great to test all of those systems.

And it gave you an excuse to troll people before the game's out properly!

[Laughs] We were very good about telling them the last moments were going to be very tricky. The other good thing which happened was – and this was pretty crazy – we did the Moon, which we teased from the off, then we gave a very small window so we had a high concurrency [of players]. Unfortunately it had to be while everybody was in the office in America, so it was timed inconveniently for some people. But it was by getting as many players as possible in a small area of our game. We actually had

Above Bungie has nailed another gaming icon – the perfectly spherical and white Traveler is already instantly recognisable, and the game isn't even out yet.





→ EA HAS REVEALED ITS ANNUAL DLC REVENUE ACROSS ITS ENTIRE PORTFOLIO WILL HIT $1 BILLION



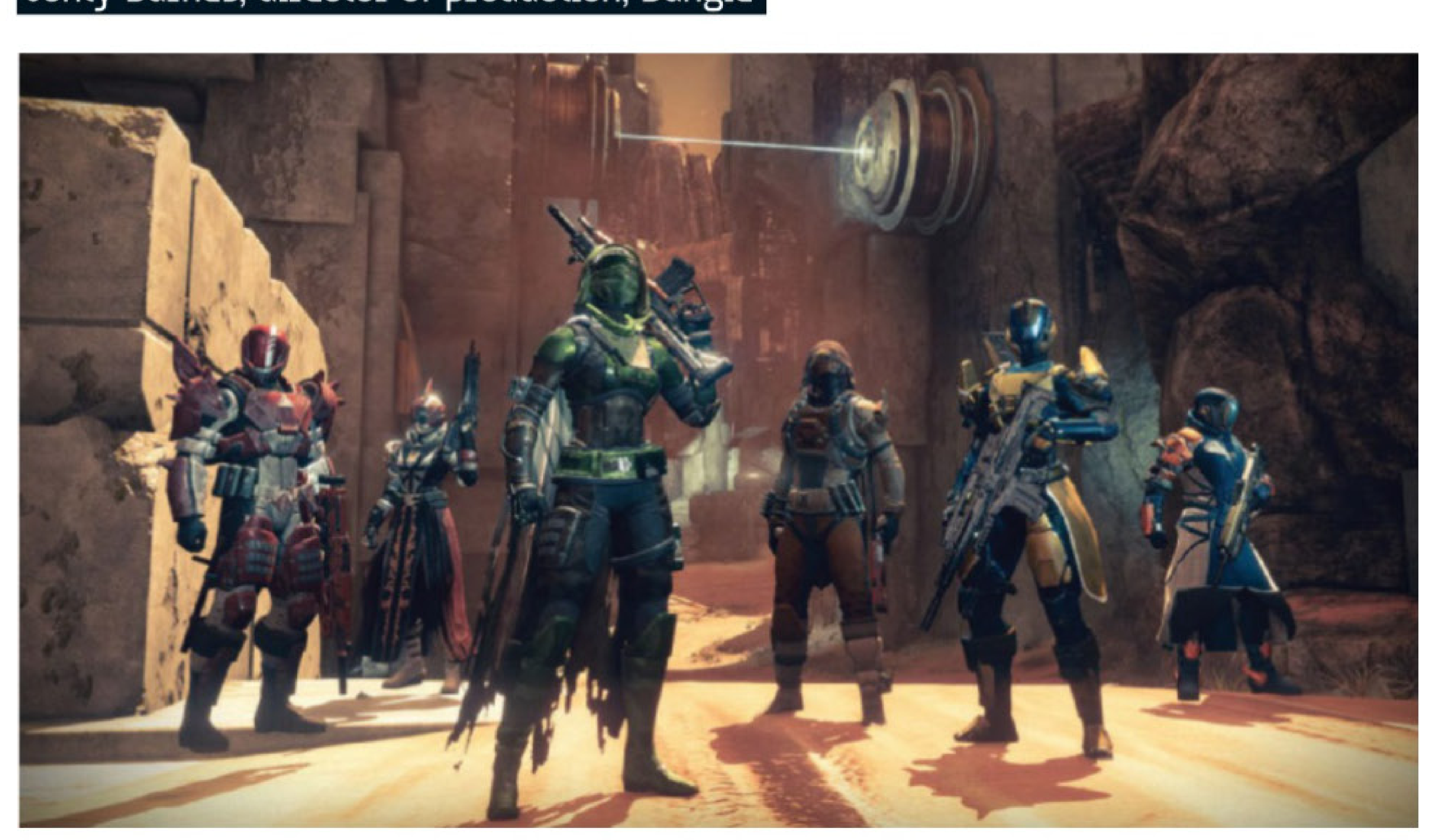
higher concurrency than any launch time of any Bungie games previously, in the beta. That was incredible. Way over 850,000. That for us was like 'we're better than we've done before' – that built a lot of confidence in being ready for launch.

Has focus on competitive multiplayer shifted at all since the beta?
Let me tell you something – over 50% of the players got to level eight, which means they went into a lot of activities. Quite a lot of people spent 40-plus hours in the beta, which is amazing. We looked at the spread of activities and it was pretty even. One of the goals that we wanted to have was to have your player progression drive your behaviour into many activities and participate in them. So we saw people that we knew from even our statistics on other games weren't typically into competitive were participating in competitive. Equally we didn't see a convergence on any one activity, so that was a big win for us. A really important aspect of our game is all of the rewards and things you get in your private loot stream and otherwise can be used in any of the activities, so you're always getting something and you're not specialising. You're just progressing as a guardian in the universe. So people will jump into PVP to get some of those rewards… it controls really nicely because it's one of the less-intense versions of competitive multiplayer, so I can always just take over points and I can cap and I can not feel like I have the challenge of being a three by three tactic. That was a lot of fun!

Above If our experience of the beta is anything to go by, expect a lot of players blitzing missions and the other players dancing about.

Below Barnes told us a huge amount of effort has been put into the customisational facet of the game – hence why the camera shifts to third-person view in The Tower. It's all about vanity.

> "There was a saying we've said before to keep us from taking our progress for granted: we want to be Avatar, not Waterworld"
>
> Jonty Barnes, director of production, Bungie



COMMUNITY WATCH

Bungie is known for its strong belief in integrating the community into its game development as much as possible, and *Destiny*'s iterative creation has been no different. "I don't think things like Forge would ever have existed in *Halo* if it wasn't for our relationship with the players and the community out there," explains Barnes. "I think when you look at the way that we are going to build upon the *Destiny* universe, the community is now a voice in that. One of the things we did for the Beta was to create a forum that we had metrics on so we could see what people liked the most and what they'd complained or asked for the most. [The response to that] has already changed some of our prioritisation in future work that we have planned."

To finish on a mean-spirited question: this is still all a gigantic risk, right? What if it goes wrong?
Well! [laughs] Entertainment is a risk – notoriously. There was a saying we've said before to keep us from taking our progress for granted: we want to be *Avatar*, not *Waterworld*. I think there's this part which is very early on in the project where you don't know what the game is that you're making, but we very much trust in the talent at Bungie. Entertainment is risky, and we make sure that we're taking risks. If you don't, you're going to just be copying everything else and you're not going to be doing something exciting.



LINK AND ANIMAL CROSSING 'AOC' (ADD-ON CONTENT) HAS BEEN REVEALED FOR MARIO KART 8

Consoles: Is Japan Tapping Out?





Take a good look at the new generation of consoles and tell me what's missing. Triple-A exclusives? Sure, those bad boys take a good while to develop and so most of the big announced games haven't made it to the party yet. Rhythm-action games, you say? A cracking shout and yes, it's a shame, but you can blame the annualisation of *Guitar Hero* and our stacks of plastic peripherals for that. No, the answer I was looking for was 'Japanese games'. The mobile and handheld markets are so big in Japan that on the new generation of consoles (Wii U aside – I'll get to that in a moment), only five of the games available in the West were actually developed in Japan.

The late releases of both Xbox One and PS4 in Japan won't have helped, sure, but slow uptake on both consoles is probably even more of a turn-off for prospective developers. Why create something for these two new platforms when the install base for the last-gen machines makes them look so much more appealing? Why change the fundamental way your teams code games to suit a platform less supported than those you already work on? We saw exactly the same thing last generation. Only now, the Japanese market has *Puzzle & Dragons* – its own *Angry Birds*, if you will – to push unsure developers away from console and towards mobile.

With this in mind, Nintendo's decision to move away from the standard console formula with Wii U (and, to a lesser degree, Wii before it) seems almost prophetic. Consoles struggled to find their footing for some time in Japan last generation, so fusing the 'classic' home gaming experience with a mobile one via the GamePad suddenly seems like a fairly smart, if poorly implemented and branded, move. It'll be fine either way thanks to the usual keystones of *Mario* and *Zelda*, but this certainly

> Nintendo's decision to move away from the standard console formula with Wii U seems almost prophetic

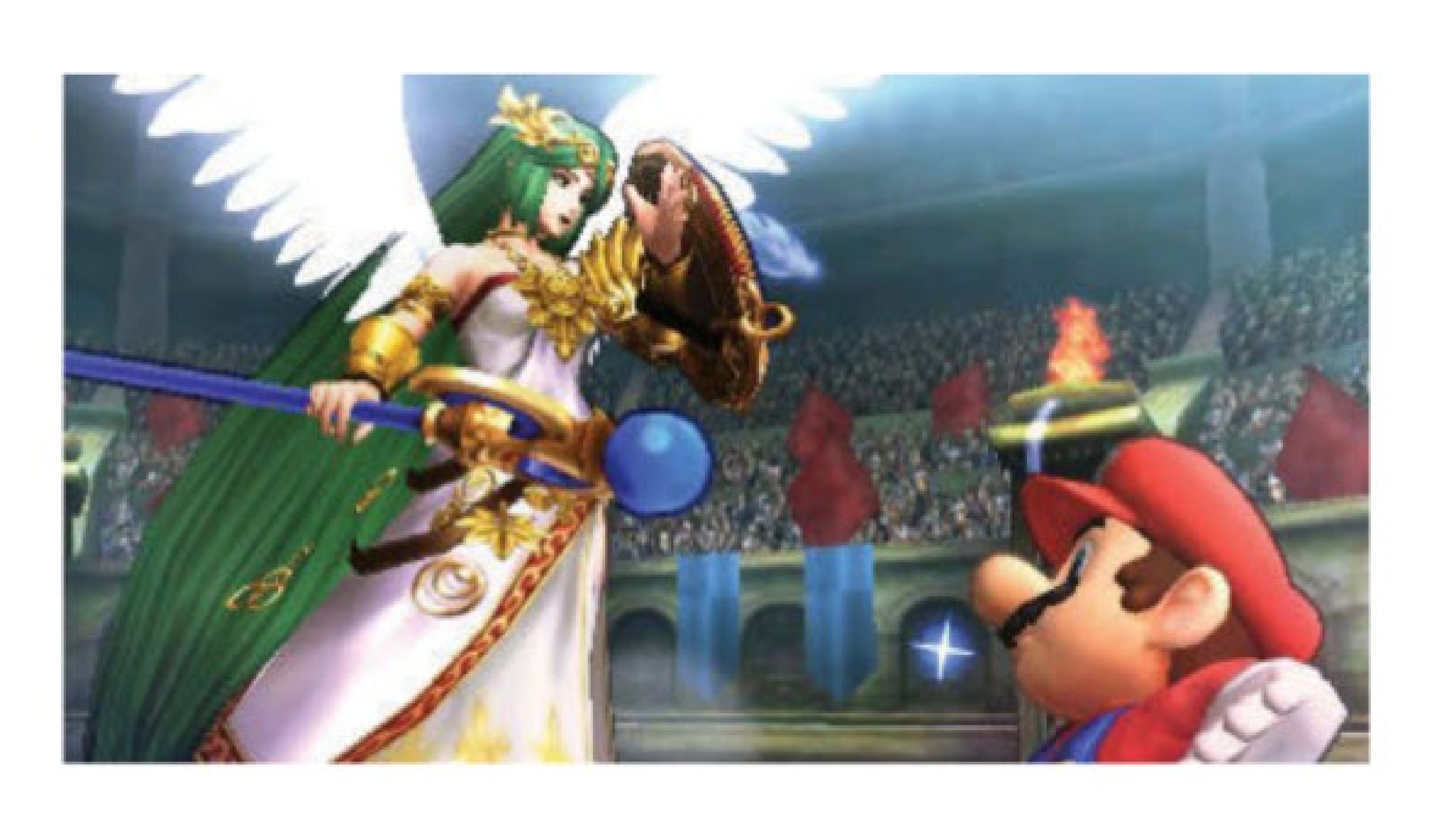
paints the underpowered console/tablet hybrid in a different light. But hey, it's not like other Japanese devs are queueing up to release games for it, either.

No, outside of the biggest brands that were always going to come to console (so *Metal Gear* and *Final Fantasy*, then), we're only just starting to see third-parties come into play. The console holders have done the right thing in busting out their wallets to kickstart the revolution and all of the pioneers – *Bayonetta 2* on Wii U, *Scalebound* on Xbox One and *Bloodborne* for PS4 – look excellent. We can only hope they do enough to make the Japanese audience put their phones and handhelds down for long enough to really take interest, because only then will the rest of the industry consider following suit. I'm really enjoying this new generation so far, but it'll be even better once install bases and retail releases hit the kinds of numbers that make them seem like far safer prospects for so many understandably cautious third-party Japanese teams. But with daily revenue from games like *Puzzle & Dragons* rivalling LTD income from beloved cult classics like *Nier* and *Shadow Hearts*, we can't exactly say we blame them either. Bloody phones.

Luke Albigés is Deputy Editor of Play magazine and would very much like some amazing Japanese games to play on his PS4, thanks very much.

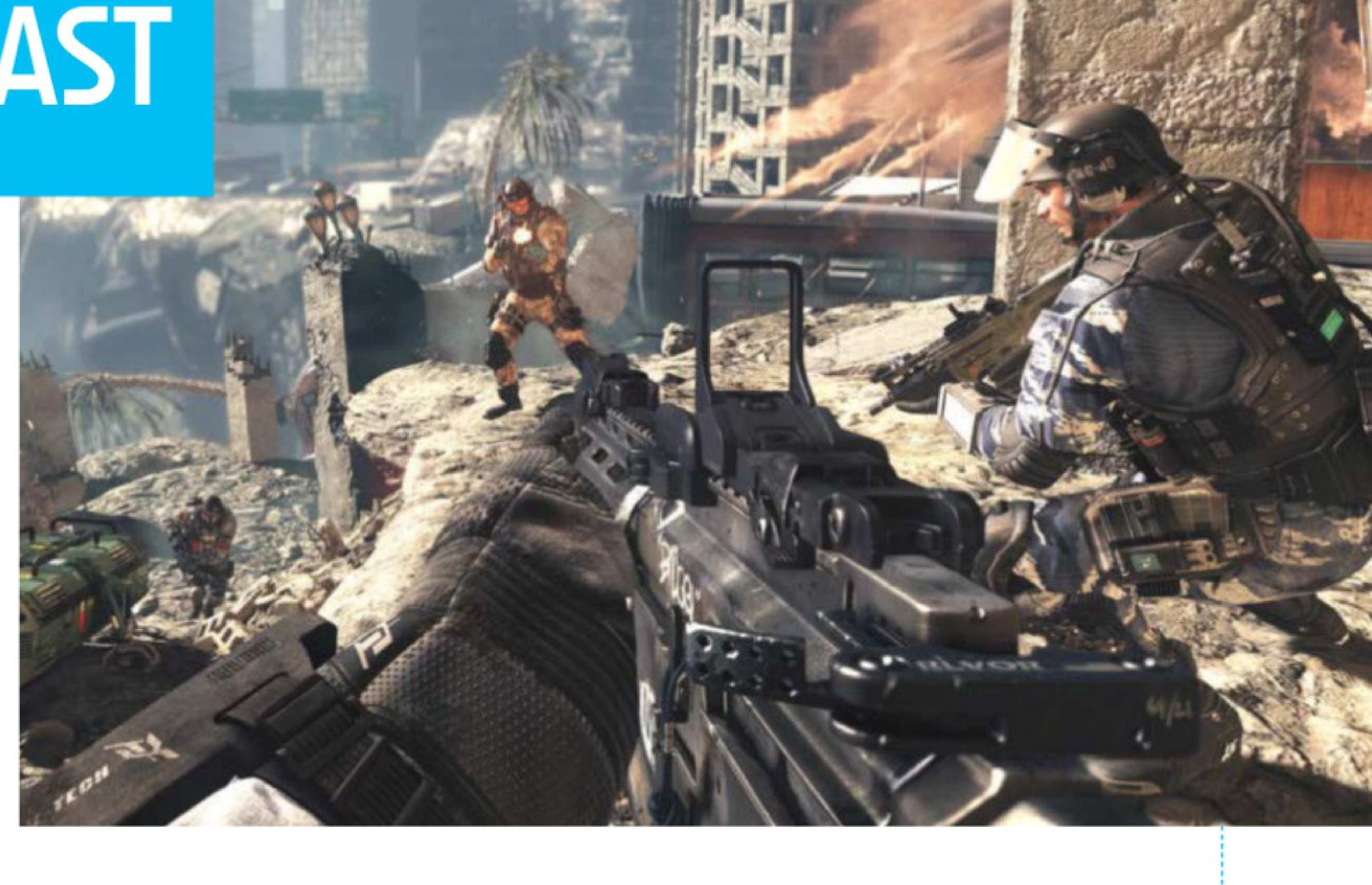


● If you're in possession of a Japanese 3DS, chances are you've already done the smart thing and imported the new *Smash Bros.* game. As a big fan of fighting games on consoles, we're still not overly sold on the idea of playing on a handheld (the screen seems too small to keep up with the action) but even so, it's a fair indication of the awesomeness that'll be arriving on Wii U early next year.



COAST TO COAST

with Gray Nicholson



Enough about graphics, what about sound?



It's surprising how little you hear about game audio, considering its contribution to the overall effect. George Lucas has said more than once that sound is 50 per cent of the movie experience. Can it be any less for a story that you are ostensibly in? Yet it gets a miserable fraction of the attention the graphics do. The popularity of certain genres dictates that much sound in video games is devoted to recreating the discharge of weapons. Among the first questions friends and I ask each other about new games is, "How do the guns sound?" Mainstream coverage might address this by spitting out a single adjective – "meaty", for example – indicative of its neglectful treatment of all things sonic. Like describing a car's handling as swervy, this might be broadly true, but is insubstantial information.

So what is a good gun sound? You want a tight, detailed bark, hard and mid-rangey, like the shootout in *Heat*; not too much bass; not too much compression of dynamic range, either, a processing trick that ensures the sound is loud on varied systems including little TV speakers, but spares the connoisseur the detail he craves.

> Sound gets a miserable fraction of the attention that graphics do

Game audio is another thing entirely when voiced by the potent sonic artillery of a painstakingly assembled surround system, a thousand watts bridling in power amps, poised to grip the air in the room, steering enormous sounds this way and that with invisible muscle.

It's about much more than just the up-front, earsplitting sound effects of weapons. It can be the electrical thrum of a regenerating shield that seems to swell around you, the fine click and whirr of robotics, even just how much standing outside a nightclub in a virtual city sounds like standing outside a nightclub in a real one, all throbbing low end and a sense of pressure. I asked one surround-equipped friend, over whose mic I sometimes hear the blare of speakers when things get rowdy, what good game sound was.



Mass Effect is one of the better examples of how audio enhances the overall experience.

What did he look for? I expected something about the pneumatic drumming of a suppressed MP5 or the throaty roar of a distressed engine. "Ambience for me is important," he said. "The smaller details, like the sound of wind, the rustle of the trees. That's what really helps me become immersed."

For Paul, a movie buff with a monstrous reference system, it was the quality of the sound editing. "Clarity and depth. For me the audio is every bit as important as the gameplay itself," he said. "Good surround placement, too. That's very important. I want the video game equivalent of the lobby scene from *The Matrix*."

And that is where the gold standard lies. Both Mr Ambience and Mr Movies go first to Hollywood when auditioning a new piece of audio gear or recalibrating for a new room. The former to *Star Trek* for dynamic space scenes and clean dialog tracks, the latter to his lobby scene for crisp, positional gunfire. We are without a reference quality test disc with comparable status for a pure gaming setup, but getting closer. "Until last gen, audio quality on video games just wasn't good enough to use as a test for a system," said Paul, but *Forza* and *Battlefield* provided the benchmarks for their genres, he felt. Now that we have widespread adoption of uncompressed in-game audio, we can be enveloped in a sound field broader and deeper than Dolby Digital could provide. The canvas is there to thrill us like the movies, making today an exciting time for audio dweebs. Whether anyone talks about it or not.

Gray Nicholson is a former video games journalist who now resides in America, acknowledging his roots as he sees fit

Five Things About The Sims 4

Maxis' infamous franchise has hypnotised players the world over with its virtual representation of real life that manages to tread the line between complete suburban-life simulator and cartoon representation of real life. Its uniqueness inspired a movement of fans around the world, and the new instalment promises to change the way we play the game forever. We spoke to producer Ryan Vaughn about five things that will change in *The Sims 4*...

1 It's learnt a lot from *Sim City*'s DRM issues...

"We've learned a lot over the past few years, and we're keen with *The Sims 4* to not repeat the mistakes of the past. More importantly, we know our players from *The Sims* feature pretty well – we've been making games for them for almost 15 years now, and it's clear that players want to play *their* games and want to make *their* stories and they don't want to have any impediment from elsewhere changing their games. With *The Sims 4*, it's optional to connect to other players: at its core, it's a single-player offline experience."

2 It'll push Pancake Bob to new levels of fame...

"We didn't expect the fans to pick up on Pancake Bob so much! We were delighted when the meme came out – it was one of the assets we created for marketing that I really wanted to get into the campaign, so I'm really happy people have made all these different stories about him. We've actually built him into the game, so when it ships in September, you'll be able to play as Pancake Bob."

3 It'll make you more house-proud than you've ever been before...

"The gallery is going to be a lot more powerful to players than they expect. Having the ability to import other players characters directly into your game is really going to change the way people play. The fact you can check out someone else's house or decorations and then just drop that directly into your game with just the click of a button… it's going to be a really special experience."

4 It'll give anarchic players more freedom...

"We have brand new death types that are tied directly to your Sims' emotions. So you can have your Sims die of laughter or have your Sims die of anger – that's a lot of fun to play with. You can push your Sims into such a furious moment, or embarrass them to death, essentially, so there are going to be really fun ways for our players to kill off their Sims."

> "We have brand new death types that are tied directly to our Sims' emotions. So you can have your Sims die of laughter or have your Sims die of anger"

5 It's much more random than its predecessors...

"I was playing with my Sims inside my house, and these two other Sims walked outside (one of which was wearing an astronaut helmet, while the other was completely ripped and in a tank top). The guy wearing the tank top stopped and just started doing push-ups in the middle of the street, and the guy in the helmet just started cracking up laughing. So I made my Sims go out and befriend them. Later that day, they went to the bar and the guy in the tank top was now wearing a bright pink suit, ordering cocktails at the bar."



What's your fantasy developer/franchise match-up?

→ Black Tusk has recently taken to the web to reassure fans of the *Gears Of War* franchise that it has what it takes to do the series justice. The developer's transition onto the project raises an interesting question – how much leeway are gamers willing to give studios moving onto strong IP before they move too far away from what gamers are expecting? We can't answer that until Black Tusk's new *Gears* game comes out, but what we *can* ask is: if you had infinite budget and control, which developer would you put on what franchise, and why?

■ Firaxis making *Halo*; epic turn-based awesomeness that would be!
@moneyball_mase, Twitter

■ Cliff Bleszinsky (at any studio) working on a new *Unreal Tournament*. He knows the spirit of the first *Unreal*, and he could repeat it!
Miguel Cruz, Facebook

■ Bioware working on a new *Brothers In Arms*. They are masters of storytelling and immersion. Two things *Brothers In Arms* set out to do in a war game, but didn't always achieve. I would love to see *Mass Effect*'s depth and action/consequence dynamic at play in the next *Brothers In Arms*.
Peter van Den Dungen, Facebook

■ PlatinumGames working on *Ninja Gaiden 4*. Team Ninja have obviously lost their touch, but Platinum could get the series back to the incredible heights of *Ninja Gaiden* (*Black*).
Peter Snoeren, Facebook

■ *Borderlands* by David Cage – it would have more QTEs than looting.
@SirVeritiero, Twitter

■ Lucasarts making a *Dr. Who* point 'n' click adventure.
@El_Pinata, Twitter

■ Man, Square-Enix could design an amazing fantasy arcade racer. (Not *Chocobo Racing*, though, obviously...).
@midi2304, Twitter

■ Hideo Kojima working on a new *Tenchu* – he'd make it the game it deserves to be!
@pressxtoskip, Twitter



*After a decade dominating the battlefield, the last couple of years have seen Call of Duty withdraw to the defensive. Now, after spending the last three years mounting a counter-attack, **games™** speaks to the studio responsible for bringing the world's biggest game back on track*

FALL OF



You've heard it before: this is the year *Call Of Duty* ushers in a revolution. There's the promise of an overhaul to the design principles; a renewed focus on storytelling (emphasised either by the presence of a Hollywood writer or actor); and, lest we forget the series' signature USP, a rebalanced multiplayer experience destined to reinstate it as the tactical benchmark in competitive online gaming. In truth, *COD*'s efforts to surprise and innovate over the years have become as predictable as its signature parade of retina-singeing explosions. But what else would you expect from the most profitable videogame franchise ever created?

But three years is a long time. It's the crucial difference between a studio given the room to cultivate an idea, take risks and allow it to mature into a cohesive product, and a game that is designed specifically to meet a predetermined release date on an investor's calendar. This is the quandary that *Call Of Duty* has faced since it ditched the trenches of WWII: every year millions of fans gather for gaming's biggest event, each looking for just enough iteration to the series' rigidly planted checklist of features to consume their gaming habit for the next twelve months. With two studios systematically alternating on a two-year development cycle to feed the habit, constantly lumbering the weight of a looming deadline, finding the room to innovate without alienating its core audience has been a seemingly insurmountable task. But things are about to change.

"Meaningful, un-ignorable innovation," declared Activision CEO Eric Hirshberg addressing the issue when he took the stage at August's *Call Of Duty: Advanced Warfare* event in Cologne. "[Bringing this] to the *COD* franchise, while at the same time staying true to the things that people know and love about *COD*, is no easy challenge." But what Hirshberg outlines as a dramatic shake-up to the franchise isn't so much a change in course for the series itself (although, *Advanced Warfare* does push the series further into futuristic territory) but a change in the company's mindset. With Infinity Ward a relative husk since the mass exodus of 2010 (although it recently absorbed NeverSoft into its hallowed »

Development began on *Advanced Warfare* shortly after the studio finished co-development with Infinity Ward on *Modern Warfare 3*. For much of its production the game was being developed under the codename Blacksmith.

> **"We need to bring something for the fans, something for ourselves, something that everybody can get behind, and really push the franchise forward"**
> *Greg Reisdorf, Sledgehammer Games*

halls) and Treyarch promoted to the lead studio, it wasn't just time for a creative rethink but an entirely new perspective. Enter Sledgehammer Games, the studio given an unprecedented three years and creative freedom to redefine *Call Of Duty* for a new generation.

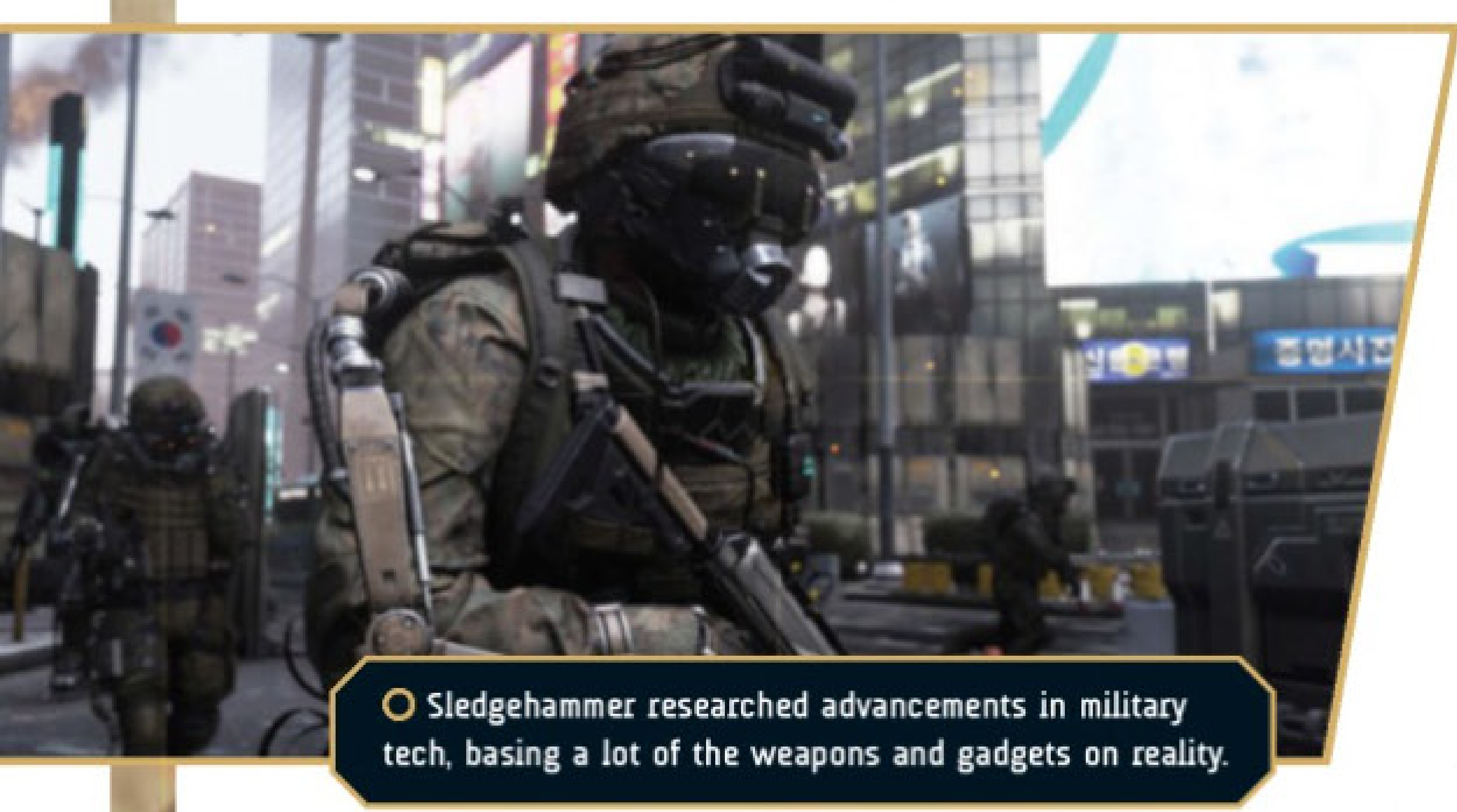


The studio wanted to base the game in a period of time that would enable them to push technology but still ground it within realism. While it may share a few superficial similarities to *Titanfall*, it doesn't go quite as extreme.

Sledgehammer had a trial run before it secured the gig. *Advanced Warfare* may signal the first *COD* title that the studio has spearheaded but it also worked with Infinity Ward – not long after the infamous exit of Jason West and Vince Zampella – co-developing *Modern Warfare 3*, and before that was working on a story-driven (and rumoured third-person) *COD* title that was eventually scrapped. But with its own set of ideas and aspirations intended to revamp the formula, the studio has its eyes fixated on the future. 2054 to be precise, where advanced military technology has ushered in the age of the super soldier; augmented by exoskeletons, soldiers have increased speed, strength and agility to navigate through the battlefield like never before.

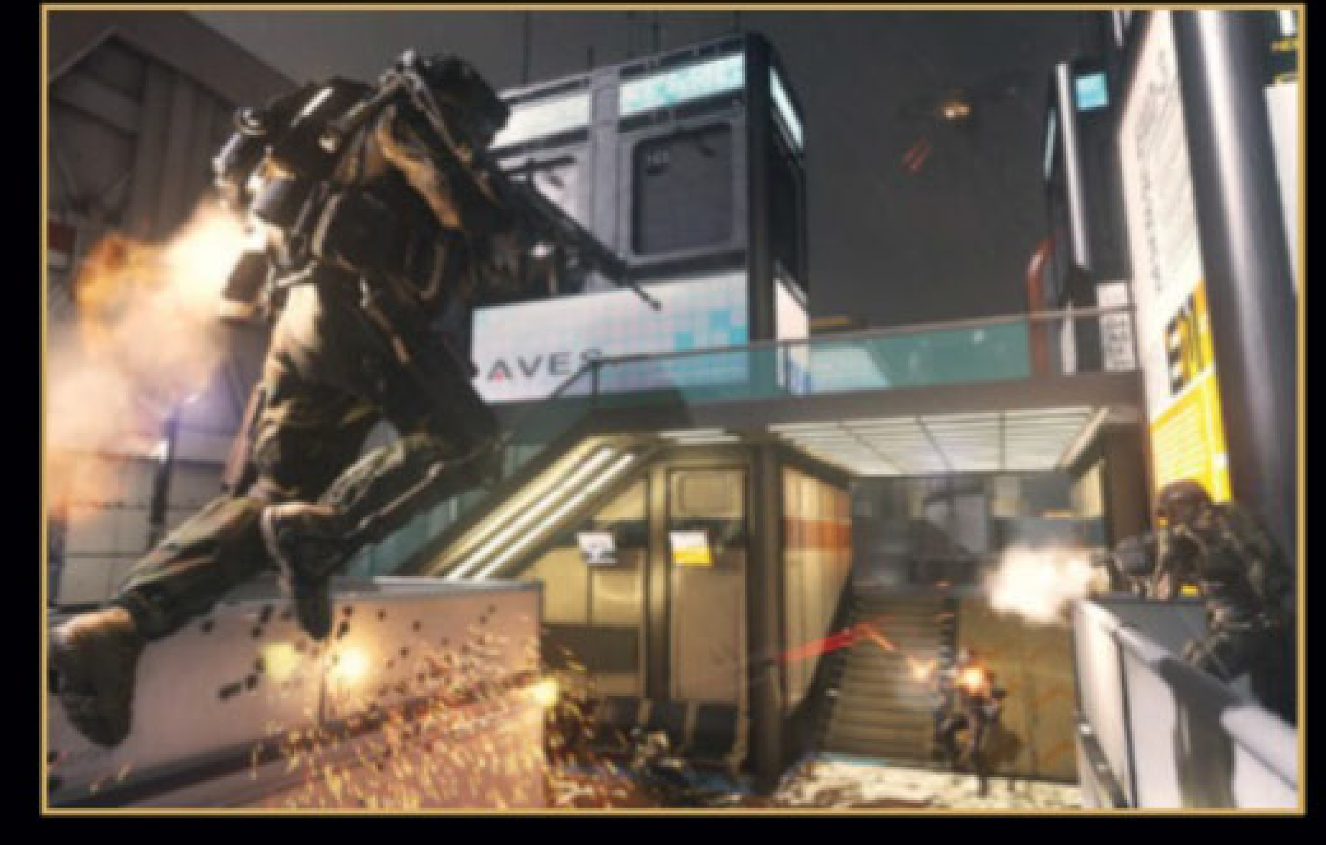
"It was tough in the beginning to get that idea of where that line was, how far we could go with it," Sledgehammer's Greg Reisdorf, lead multiplayer designer at the studio, admits when discussing the futuristic setting of *Advanced Warfare*. "It's been a great time with that. Like, there's a 3D-printed weapon. When we first talked about that years ago it was outrageous – like how could you have a 3D weapon? That's crazy. Then it's all about that problem solving around how it would actually work, how it would have a 3D printer – would it print into the magazine? Well then nobody would ever have to reload. So it prints to the ammo reserve – but how does that look, how does that function with our reload mechanics and speed reloading? All those things, and it's just been… that's been a lot of fun through the project."

Reisdorf is specifically highlighting the impact that the new setting has on arguably the most integral feature to *COD*'s


Sledgehammer researched advancements in military tech, basing a lot of the weapons and gadgets on reality.

A GUIDE TO ADVANCED WARFARE'S MAPS

games™ casts an analytical eye over the new killing grounds in the latest Call Of Duty



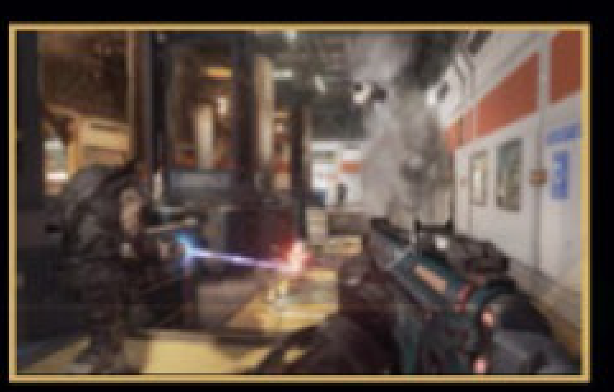
Ascend

AN INTRICATE labyrinth of pathways that make it an ideal map for objective-based game modes. Once again close-quarter combat would seem to be preferential here, but Sledgehammer has added a nice twist in a new system of map-based Scorestreaks. Teams are able to hack into the map's automated sentry system and unleash a furious attack on enemies around the level.



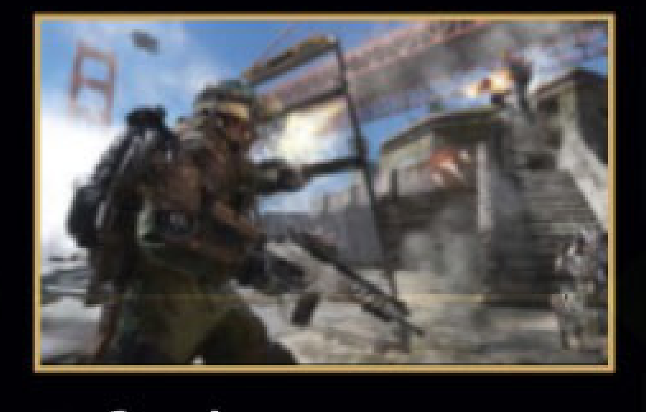
Riot

LIKE MANY of the maps in *Advanced Warfare*, everything seems relatively standard until you put your Exo-suit into good use. Riot is a burnt-out husk of a prison, featuring a series of walkways and a second floor that can be accessed by a quick double-jump. Canny players might take advantage of players who accidently set off the metal detectors, but those looking to camp will find themselves exposed. It's a great map for energetic close-quarter combat.



Biolab

A TRADITIONAL map layout geared towards team deathmatch, there's not a huge amount of verticality to the arena – the whole area is pretty flat both exterior and interior – which means you'll likely want to keep your boots firmly planted on the ground. The design is an old science laboratory, complete with floating bodies in test tubes, which means there are both small pathways and open areas that encourage a variety of different playstyles.



Defender

WHILE SLEDGEHAMMER has gone back to *Black Ops II* for influence when it comes to its Pick 13 system, it doesn't completely ignore *Ghosts*' multiplayer efforts. Defender features a gargantuan dynamic event that consumes part of the level, with a tidal wave wiping out the shore and any players who happen to be caught in the area. It's also the map that has been designed specifically for Uplink mode, with plenty of high vantage points and structures.



success: multiplayer. We've seen before how the new setting and technology has enhanced the histrionics of the single-player campaign. Rocket-jumping over obstacles in your path and boosting into cover, slowing down time with Overdrive and using the strength of the exoskeleton to rip-off car doors to use as protection. There are subtler features too, with digital projections of the environment and stripped-back HUD elements recalling the studio's previous life working on the original *Dead Space*.

GREG REISDORF, SLEDGEHAMMER GAMES

All of these are added to the usual cocktail of absurdist fiction and bombastic spectacle – a particular standout level involves the destruction of San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge (the new White House when it comes to Hollywood's penchant for obliterating its own iconography), which collapses on a US aircraft carrier passing underneath it. Sledgehammer has no intention of reinventing the wheel clearly; instead it's reconfiguring the mechanism that makes it spin. And there's no better place to look for an example of this than in the multiplayer.

"It's allowed us to do a ton of stuff, to look at all aspects of the game and figure out what we can innovate," says Reisdorf. "From big things like Exo movement, supply drops, the virtual lobby and virtual firing range to much smaller things around even how the mini-map works, smaller little details within active-sight, speed-reloading, various little features. It's also allowed us to take those larger features and really go in and dig in deep to how they're balanced, how they work, the fluidity of all the Exo movement combines together and just really hone in on that intuitive experience off the controller."

This comes down, quite specifically, to mobility. The presence of the exoskeleton reimagines the player with superpowers, which has a drastic impact on how the game *feels* when you hit the online battlefield. Thrusters mounted on your metallic frame enable you to boost in a double- »

> "It was tough in the beginning to get that idea of where that line was, how far we could go with it"
> Greg Reisdorf, Sledgehammer Games

There's a new class of energy-driven 'beam' weapons that don't have ammo. Instead, they take time to cool down and recharge.

Kevin Spacey not only provided his voice to Jonathan Irons, but also took part in motion capture sessions, enabling the animators to capture the nuance of his performance.

HOLLYWOOD CALLS

Kevin Spacey is starring in *Advanced Warfare* but he isn't the only acting royalty to appear in the series so far

Jason Statham

Character: Sergeant Waters
Game: Call Of Duty



Hollywood hardnut Jason Statham was the original *Call Of Duty* star, lending his gravelly larynx to the first entry in the ubiquitous series. If there's any movie star you'd follow into a real war, it'd probably be The Stath.

Gary Oldman

Character: Viktor Reznov
Game: World At War/Black Ops



Tinker? Tailor? Nope. Just soldier and spy will do for Gary in Treyarch's first two entries in the studio's trilogy-of-sorts. Disguising his cockney heritage under a thick Russian accent, Oldman's Victor Reznov was a favourite among fans.

Ed Harris

Character: Special Agent Jason Hudson
Game: Black Ops



Bringing his gruff attitude to the franchise as the no-nonsense special agent barking orders in *Black Ops*, Harris brought much of his domineering screen presence to the relatively small part in Treyarch's game.

Sam Worthington

Character: Alex Mason
Game: Black Ops/Black Ops II



Hot off the back of *Avatar*, the charisma vacuum from down under lent his talents (or his voice at least) to Treyarch's *Black Ops* and its sequel as the protagonist in both. Treyarch seems to have a penchant for attracting hot Hollywood talent.

Michael Rooker

Character: Himself/Mike Harper
Game: Black Ops/Black Ops II



The guy who played Merle Dixon, the racist redneck in *The Walking Dead* – although he's been seen more recently playing that mystical blue-faced guy in *Guardians Of The Galaxy* – played himself in the horror icons DLC of *Black Ops* before playing a separate fictional character in the game's sequel.

Ice Cube

Character: Joseph Bowman
Game: Black Ops



Another *Black Ops* vet, rapper-cum-actor Ice Cube tones down his usual macho bravado in a supporting role in Treyarch's game. The character of Bowman is also likened on the actor.

Kiefer Sutherland

Character: Sgt. Roebuck
Game: World At War



Before he was Solid Snake, Mr. Sutherland shouted 'Dogs!' a lot across both *World At War*'s campaign and its multiplayer mode. It might not have required him to prance about in a skin-tight suit covered in balls but Sutherland gives it real gusto.

Brandon Routh

Character: David 'Hesh' Walker
Game: Ghosts



His role in the last *COD* title is quite a substantial one but his presence wasn't given the due attention afforded to other stars.

» jump-type action, with a further boost added for a mid-air dodge in any direction (including down for a ground pound).

Adding to the basic functionality of the Exo suit in multiplayer are a suite of abilities that further add a sci-fi edge to the proceedings. There's a Cloak and Shield that both do exactly what you'd expect, while Overclock increases your speed briefly. Another improves health temporarily, while others show Exo movements on the map and destroy incoming enemy projectiles. As you can tell, nothing here is outside the realm of plausibility and grounding the future with tangible actions has been a cornerstone to *Advanced Warfare*'s design.

"It's always about going back to the main goal which we had from the beginning, which was gun-skill," says Reisdorf. "Everything has to enhance that. Everything with the Exo-movement has to enhance that. Everything within the modes has to enhance that. Everything within the maps has to enhance that. Having that goal to always point back to has been a huge guiding factor within everything we do in the game." It's easy to imagine how all of the enrichments can benefit tactics on the field. Quickly skirting out of cover to take down an enemy, covering ground with huge leaps across the maps, while darting around the air makes for a harder target to hit. Despite obvious parallels to similar features found in *Titanfall* and *Halo*, the decision to push action off the ground and add more urgency makes for a faster, more engaging experience. In fact, it demands a complete relearning of *Call Of Duty* multiplayer.

It could be argued that this rethink has been long overdue. After all, the first-person shooter genre is no longer just a battle for the armchair soldier, but the thousands of players worldwide that take part on a competition level. "We learn a ton from the competitive community," admits Reisdorf. "A lot

> "Every day we play the game, we have feedback sessions, we make changes to the game"
>
> **Greg Reisdorf, Sledgehammer Games**

The Exo suit has a battery life, which means that any special abilities tied to the suits functionality will only have a set amount of uses.

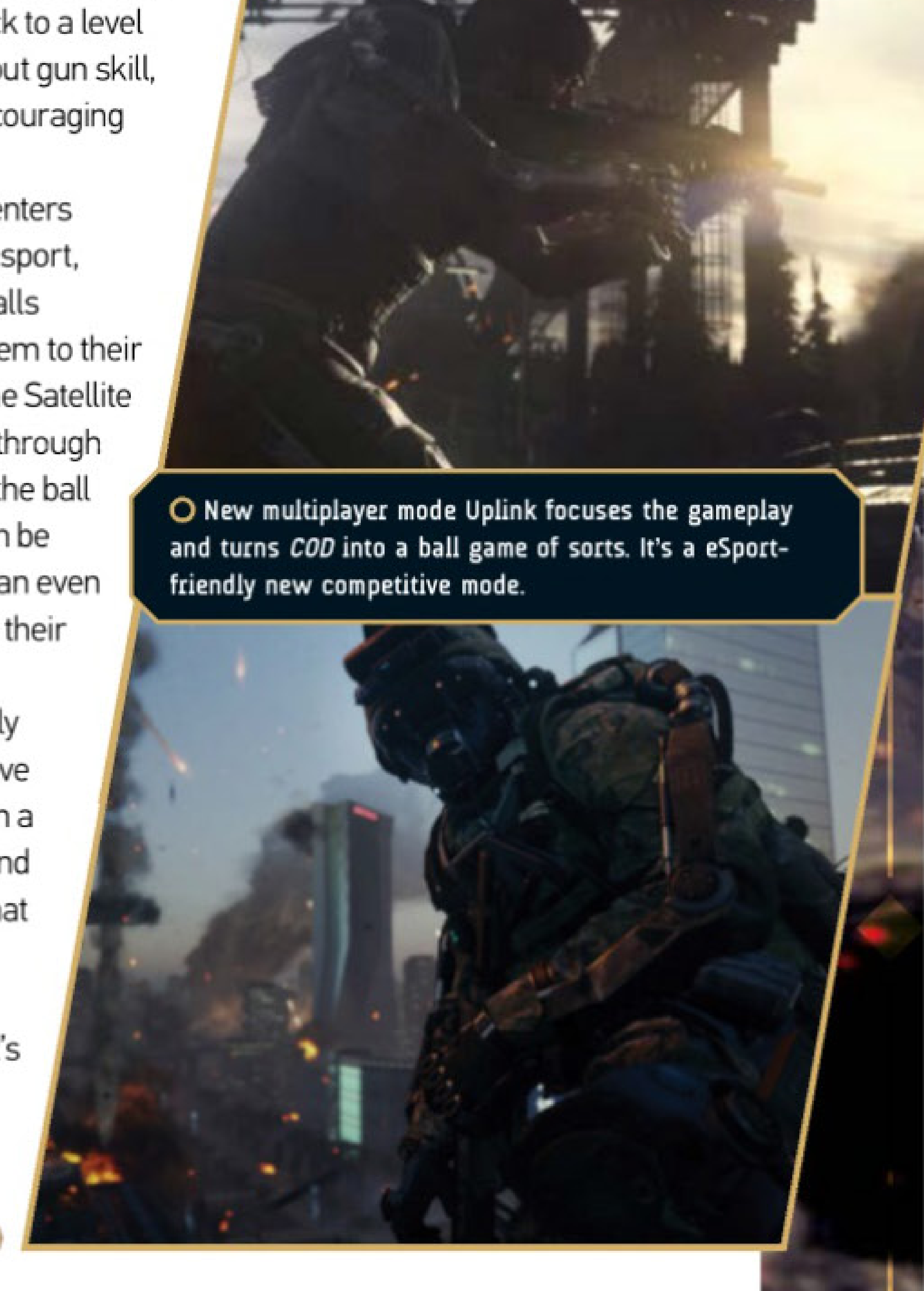
of people tend to freak out when they hear that, but it's not like they're dictating the game. But we listen to them in the sense of if the game's not competitive or they're able to find exploits or anything like that, the game is no longer balanced at that point, and it's no longer fun for everyone. However, if we can make it competitive at that level it's going to be competitive for everybody, it's going to be fun for everybody." It's a new balance that *COD* has had to take into consideration in recent years: appeasing the usual mass of casual players alongside the emergence of eSport culture. It's not just about crafting a game for someone to play, but one that people also will enjoy watching.

"We do have some different approaches," responds Reisdorf when **games™** asks him whether there's a different design methodology when catering for viewers as well as players. "I think there are some different angles to look at it that actually help provide some context to why we would do various things. There are certain modes like domination that work for eSports and competitive modes, but at the same time they have multi-point objectives so they're a little harder to view, a little harder to understand, a little harder to follow."

Sledgehammer took that comparison and realised that having a multi-point objective mode wasn't just hard to actually watch but also to play within that ultra-competitive environment. "It's hard to play at that point," says Reisdorf, "because you have to know those points are moving, that those points are being taken, who's taking what point just to convey that information as they're playing, as they're doing all this new Exo-movement, as they're doing all these things it gets complicated fast. To kind of bring that back to a level of 'Just go from point A to point B' and it's all about gun skill, movement, that tactical combat – and really encouraging that with the mode itself."

This is where the newest multiplayer mode enters the fray: Uplink. Much more akin to a traditional sport, opposing teams race to capture two coloured balls (Satellites) dotted around the map and return them to their specific goal matrix to score points. Throwing the Satellite through the target scores one, while carrying it through the goal nets you two. However, while carrying the ball removes the ability to use a weapon, the ball can be tossed to free up your hands once more – you can even throw it an enemy to catch, therefore sacrificing their own gun and giving back yours for a skilful kill.

"One of the things around Uplink that we really wanted to do was to create a single point objective mode," explains Reisdorf. "By single point I mean a place where we could really focus the combat and have something where players are moving to that area to engage, in order to make viewing much nicer and to make the experience like 'I know where I'm going, I'm going to the objective'. That's where people are going to be, that's where the fun and excitement happen. To make that more interesting and build on top of that is where all the other mechanics come from, with the »



New multiplayer mode Uplink focuses the gameplay and turns *COD* into a ball game of sorts. It's a eSport-friendly new competitive mode.

Exo-movement allowing for players to jump into the goal or throw items in, using their Exo abilities as they're grabbing the Satellite and moving it from one end of the map to the other… the elements really made the mode stand out, especially for what we were trying to do with all the new movements. They work very well together."

This inevitably feeds back into the new Exo abilities and the choices that the player will make to hone the skills of their fighter. Moreover, the studio is further emphasising the importance of straightforward competitive play with a return to a fan-favourite class system. While *Black Ops II* multiplayer barely set the world alight compared to its predecessors, it's generally regarded at Sledgehammer as the best iteration of the multiplayer to date, which is down, in some part, to its Pick 10 system.

Where *Ghosts* abandoned this concept, *Advanced Warfare* adapts it into the Pick 13 system. In Pick 10, players were no longer consigned to a specific number of weapons, perks, grenades and kill streaks. Instead it was based on a point system, where players could put points into whichever part of their class they desired. Not fussed about a second weapon but wanted more perks? That was fine. Want to load your guns with loads of attachments? That was possible too. It allowed the player to sculpt their character in whatever image they wished, without having to compromise due to enforced restrictions.

Pick 13 expands on this idea, adding a few more points to spend and more options to spend them on. There are further options for customisation as well. For example, Scorestreaks return from *Modern Warfare 3* that enable streak bonuses without having to achieve consecutive kills, while also adding modifiers and bonuses (and, in a series first, you can also choose zero Scorestreaks if that's your thing). For example, a traditional Scorestreak enables you to place a turret, but in *Advanced Warfare* you can modify it to fire rockets instead of bullets, or to allow you to rip it off its base and carry it around as a heavy weapon – all at the cost of extra points on the battlefield to achieve. It's a delicate balance and Sledgehammer understands the pressure and the backlash it'll face if the systems don't coalesce as expected.

"That gets into our process from the very beginning," Reisdorf says of the potential fan outrage. "Look, we play the game every day. Every day we play the game, we have feedback sessions, every day we make changes to the game, every day we look at the data we're getting from those play sessions, comparing it to the notes that we have from the players that have played the game. That's just a constant process, and it's been a constant process throughout development. And it'll be a constant process after we ship the game out."

All this talk of appeasing the *COD* converted and realigning the series to better serve the burgeoning eSport marketplace leaves out one important gamer: the newcomer. "We do have a new mode in the game that allows for less intimidation in the sense that you can go in and play against real players and bots, but have none of the stress of where everything's a competition," says Reisdorf. "It's not necessarily competition – it's how you can personally get better. It's all about your personal bests."

Further fuelling this ethos is a simple addition that caught our attention. The Virtual Firing Range is one of those ideas that's so good you're surprised it isn't already genre standard. In between matches in multiplayer, players can instantly try out any changes to their class at a press of a button. This'll transport you into a firing range, enabling you to test your new gun, or attachment, equipment – pretty much everything. It's not only a feature that veteran players will reap the benefits from but also newcomers unsure of whether they're making the right decision when putting together their class.

But among the advancements there's also some cause for concern. A new Loot system rewards players for ranking up and meeting challenge objectives with a supply drop. These contain cosmetic items to pimp up your character, but also give out special versions of weapons. These drops come in three rarities – Enlisted, Professional and Elite – and the rarer these specialised weapons are, the more capable and feature-heavy they become. The worry is whether it'll be the elite players dominating these supply drops, giving the better players a further advantage on the battlefield. But Sledgehammer is aware that balance is a hyper-sensitive issue for players.

"We know it's a challenge, but we also have a lot of underlying systems that allow us to make balancing a little easier," reveals Reisdorf, putting us at ease a little." All the weapons have weapon signatures – basically unique

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SLEDGEHAMMER

- **2005** Sledgehammer Games co-founders Schofield and Condrey work together for the first time on *007: From Russia with Love*
- **2008** The duo work together once again on *Dead Space* – a defining title for EA
- **2009** Schofield and Condrey split from EA and form their own studio, Sledgehammer Games
- **2009** Sledgehammer Games pitch to Activision a story-driven, third-person *Call Of Duty* title
- **2009** Activision acquires Sledgehammer and the studio starts building a prototype
- **2010** The third-person game is scrapped as the team are called in to help support a short-staffed Infinity Ward with *Modern Warfare 3*
- **2014** After collaborating with Infinity Ward on *Modern Warfare 3*, Sledgehammer reveals its first solo venture in the *COD* universe: *Advanced Warfare*

You can see the studio's heritage in the way the game looks. Much like Schofield and Condrey's work on *Dead Space*, *Advanced Warfare* takes major steps in integrating major elements of the HUD into the game world.



> *"This is our game, this is the game we're making, we're going to push forward towards our vision"*
> **Greg Reisdorf, Sledgehammer Games**

It'll disappoint some fans to hear that *Advanced Warfare* doesn't feature a zombie mode, although we expect there to be a surprise mode or two hidden in the game somewhere.

There are some interesting tech twists in *Advanced Warfare*, including multi-purpose grenades. Now you just hold a set number of grenades that have multiple settings, such as frag, sticky or stun. We predict this might cause some unnecessary fumbling on the battlefield.

properties to those weapons that allow us to say 'Well this weapon fires faster the longer you fire it' – the loot variants of that weapon all feature that signature so we can now balance that in this category and we can make this category work with [another] category.


"Within Pick 13 we have wildcards, meaning if you want to take four perks you're going to have to take a wildcard which is going to be an extra point and you don't necessarily get anything for that point, other than the ability to take another perk Within the Scorestreaks," he continues. "If you're taking modules and adding things onto the Scorestreaks it's increasing the cost of what it takes to earn that Scorestreak, so there's inherent balance factors in that already. To take those elements and to just focus on them and to really look at them in the sense that it's what they do – it's their job to make sure the game is balanced, fair and has no exploits.

"They go into playtests and they're playing the game, they're also dealing with feedback for the players in terms of 'I don't think this gun is so great', 'I love this gun' and 'I love this gun too much, I use it all the time'. And then comparing that with the actual data, saying 'Well you say you use this gun all the time, but you don't.' So what's going on there, how does that work… There are a lot of aspects to it. We know that there are a lot of aspects to it, but just being focused on it since the very beginning has been a huge priority for us."

The key it seems to the future success of *Call Of Duty* isn't just by focusing on evolution but also in acknowledging its past. *Advanced Warfare* doesn't blithely ignore what has come before it (specifically adapting what Sledgehammer feels works *very* well in the case of the Pick 13 system), embracing the work of other studios and making sure that it stays true to the core tenets that make *Call Of Duty* the success it is. Part of that process is the continued support and input from Infinity Ward and Treyarch, guiding the studio through its freshman effort.

"The other studios are amazing," enthuses Reisdorf. "One of the best parts about the studio model and everything else is that all the studios have unique personalities and interesting people at each one; they all have their own opinions and everything else. We'll bounce ideas off each other to make the best game possible. There's collaboration there, but we're still [individual] studios; they're still the studio's own games."

Still, the feeling of pressure that comes with the sheer scale and responsibility of the project has not been lost on the team. This isn't just another iteration to pacify fans of the largest fan base in the world, but a sequel given the time, money and creative freedom to break new ground. "This is huge. It's an amazing thing to be part of," Reisdorf beams. "From the very beginning it's been 'How do we bring something to this?' This is our chance to really show up – we need to be there, we need to show up and we need to bring something for the fans, something for ourselves, something that everybody can get behind and really push the franchise forward. It's the biggest challenge we've ever faced as a studio."



> "The freedom you had in that game to go around and complete challenges allowed me to play it the way I wanted to"
> RYAN VAUGHAN, PRODUCER, MAXIS



WHY I ❤...

The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past

RYAN VAUGHAN, PRODUCER, MAXIS

"My all-time favourite game is The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past for Super Nintendo. I had so much fun playing that game. At the core of the games I make is how I like to tell stories. The freedom you had in that game to go around and complete challenges – pull the sword out of the rock in the forest or switch between worlds with the mirror – made that game so much fun because it allowed me to play it the way I wanted to. I think that game came together for me in so many ways that easily makes it my favourite game out of all I've played."



Quantum Break

CONCEPT ■ Part videogame and part television show, this interactive cross-media project presents a universe on the brink of a temporal collapse. Translated: get ready for some slo-mo

It's about time



INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One
Origin: Finland
Publisher: Microsoft
Developer: Remedy Entertainment
Release: TBA 2015
Genre: Action-Adventure
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Coming to prominence after the success of the first *Max Payne* game in 2001, Remedy contributed to the proliferation of bullet time within videogames at the turn of the millennium. After developing a sequel, the studio spent the best part of a decade working on Microsoft exclusive Alan Wake, which couldn't quite live up to the years of hype when it finally launched.

Developer History

Alan Wake's American Nightmare
2012 [PC, Xbox 360]
Alan Wake
2010 [PC, Xbox 360]
Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne
2003 [Multi]
May Payne
2001 [Multi]

High Point

While it only enhanced the formula of the original game, *Max Payne 2* took the titular character and plunged him deeper into a brutal, richly dark noir storyline.

Usually you have to wait a couple of years before someone comes along and makes a videogame of your favourite television show, but Remedy is ahead of the curve with *Quantum Break*. Pitched as both a narrative-driven third-person action game and a live-action television show, players will get the chance to see their actions in the game reverberate into the TV series, while the drama in the show will correlate directly with what occurs in the next interactive chapter of the experience.

"The way it works is that you play through an act of the game and each act culminates in something we call a 'junction in time', where you will actually be playing as the main villain in the game," creative director Sam Lake explains to **games™**. "This is basically our interactive take on an action movie scene where we see the bad guy planning and making his moves. We're just making it interactive and letting you play the bad guy in the scene."

Set within the fictional North Eastern U.S. Riverport University, Jack Joyce, Beth Wilder and Paul Serene are caught in a time travel experiment gone wrong, endowing them with varying abilities to manipulate time itself. Trying to prevent time from collapsing in on itself and extinguishing all life on Earth, it turns out that Jack, Beth and Paul are not the only ones blessed with the powers that enable temporal tomfoolery.

Monarch Solutions is the insidious organisation hot on the trio's trail, and the game's lead villain, as Lake explains it, will possess the most powerful time power of all.

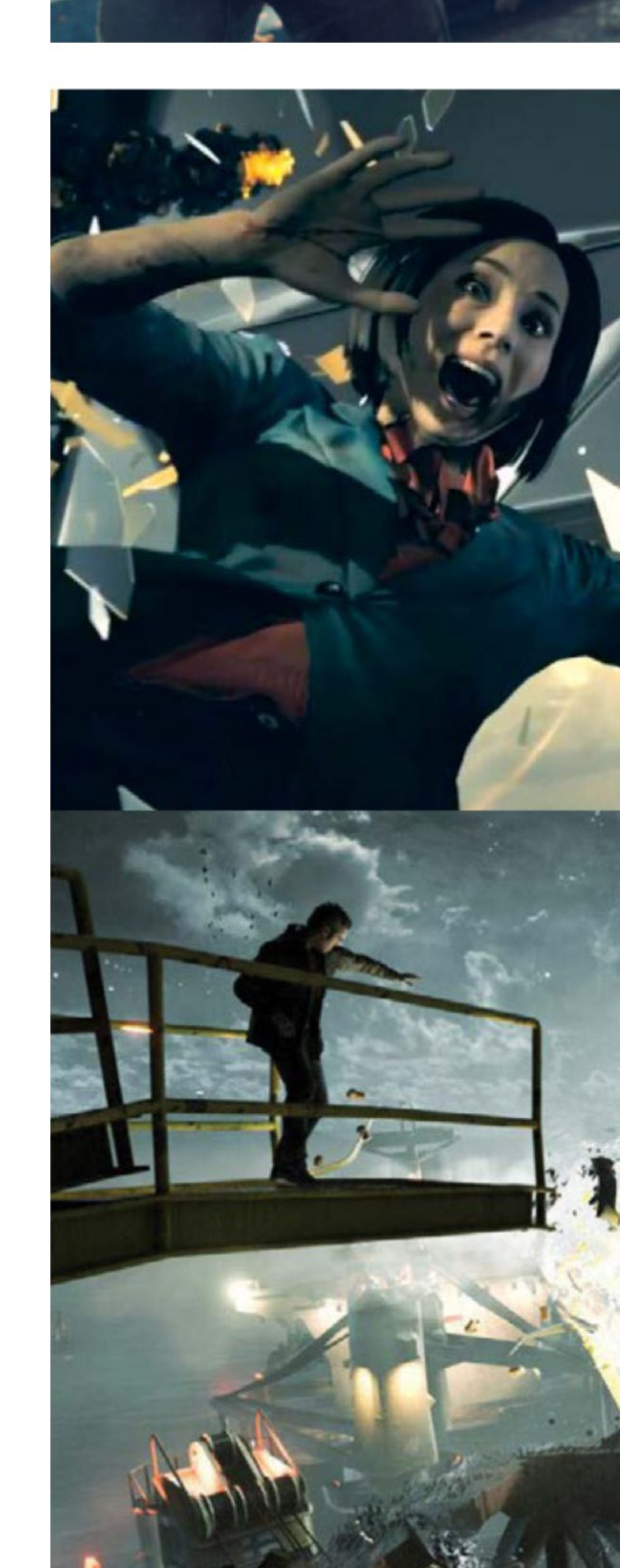
/// "It allows him to see glimpses/visions of different potential futures," he explains. "When you play as him, you explore and investigate these glimpses and then you make a decision about which of the two futures within each junction moment comes to be. You make that decision and then we jump into an episode of the show, and immediately you see the consequences of that choice that you've just made."

That also means extra work for Remedy. Lake admits that the studio is shooting multiple alternate scenes for the show to account for the different choices that players will make in the game, with the idea being that the players will each have their own version of the show.

> "We're not forcing you to watch the show, but we're building this around the optimal experience and that includes watching the show"
>
> SAM LAKE, REMEDY ENTERTAINMENT

But what about players who aren't interested in watching hours of story and just want to jump back into the game – will they be missing out? "Yes, you are missing out," Lake bluntly answers. "Of course, we're not forcing you to watch the show if you don't want to, but we're building this around the optimal experience and that includes watching the show and playing the game. From our perspective, it's an extension of when a story-driven game gives the player the choice of skipping all of the cinematics if they want to. You will be missing out if you do that and you won't be getting the full experience. It's up to the player to do what they want. It's an interactive experience and that's how it should be seen."

Remedy is keeping the live-action side of things under wraps at this time, instead walking **games™** through a segment of the game. Taken from the mid-point of the story, Jack is using his time powers to evade Monarch while trying to reunite with another hero, Beth Wilder. To make things worse, at



Below: It'll be interesting to see if the powers become more powerful as the game progresses. From what we've seen, none could be considered a weapon.

TIME TRIAL

WHILE THE HEROES of the game are able to manipulate time to navigate through the game world, they do not possess unlimited control. Ironically, all of the powers that you acquire through the game need time itself to recharge after usage. "It's time-based regeneration," Sam Lake tells games™. "All of the powers use the same resource. You need to be thinking about which time power to use at any given time and how much you use it in order to make sure you use the resource wisely." But given that time is used to support the gunplay, rather than being a main weapon itself, it doesn't come as much of a surprise that it's restricted.

Above: The whole prospect of an interactive television show wherein the direction of the story is dictated by your actions in-game is reminiscent of those crummy VHS board games that were briefly popular in the early Nineties. Let's hope *Quantum Break* is slightly better.

this point in the game the fracture in time is growing more and more unstable.

During a firefight Jack can rush through time, becoming a blur that confuses his enemies, circumventing them to attack from behind. It's relatively standard cover-based action gameplay, with Jack using his gun to take out troops. His abilities are limited to darting around the battle area and focusing his abilities on an area to freeze objects and enemies – even stopping bullets and releasing them for maximum damage.

/// From what we saw, there was a lack of potent impact to his range of abilities, mostly used to augment standard shooting gameplay rather than make the action sequences more progressive. However, Lake explains that the characters' powers will mature during the course of the game.

"There is a definite progression to Jack's time powers," he says. "We start off with things that are easy to learn, such as 'Time Rush'. Time Rush starts off as essentially a dodge move, which you can use for a very limited time to get away from danger.

Here in the mid-point of the game you can use it for a longer stretch and if you get close to an enemy you can perform an epic takedown move. Also, your time powers start small as things that can only influence one character. That makes them very intuitive to use and easy to learn, but later on you gain more control over the powers and you get better at aiming them, and deciding how large an area they cover.

"The powers are designed along with the pacing and the story progression," Lake continues. "In a way, you can think of it in that *Quantum Break* is a superhero origin story with Jack as the hero, and he is learning to use his new powers at the same time as the player is trying to understand them."

One interesting feature that we briefly explored was the Stutters. These are locations throughout the game where time is becoming unstable; freezing elements of an area in time but allowing its heroes to freely navigate around them.

In one of these instances we see time frozen in a place where Monarch has set up roadblocks on a bridge to find Jack. The people of Riverport are currently protesting against Monarch's unregulated activities and things are starting to get out of hand.

We see unhappy citizens caught in this roadblock, a potential riot situation. Monarch HQ looms high in Riverport's skyline. But Jack isn't the only one that can manipulate these

"When you watch the show you will be seeing certain things that will feed back into the next act of the game"

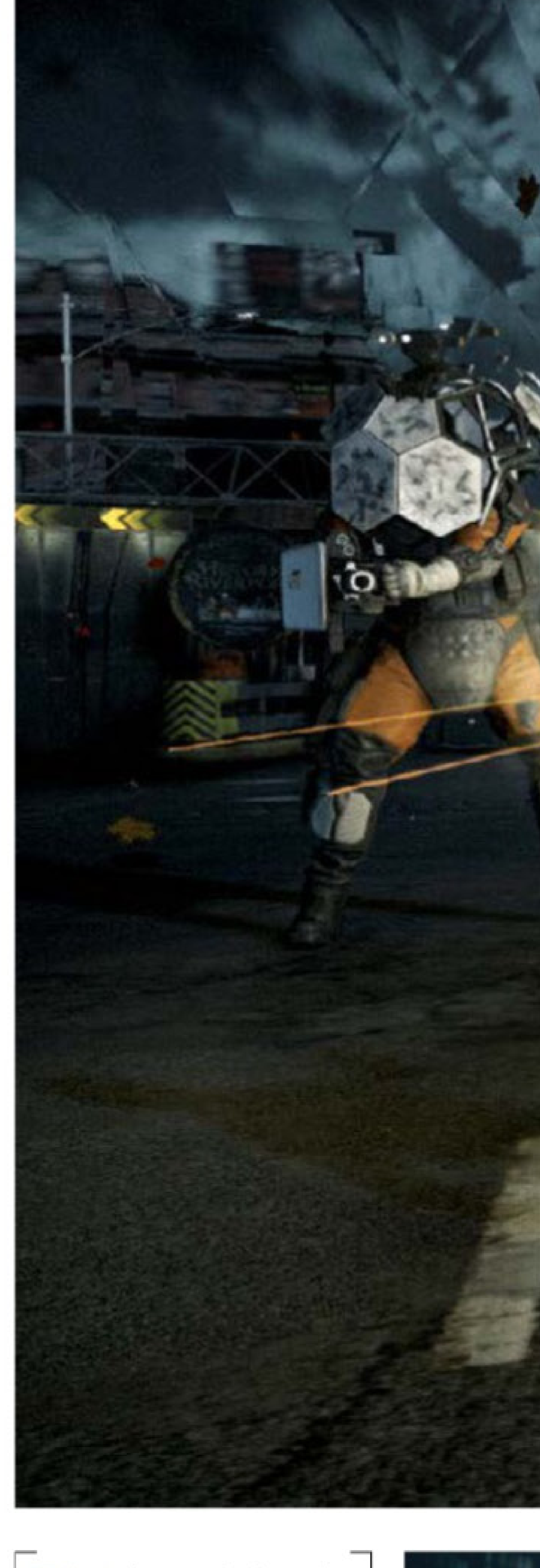
SAM LAKE, REMEDY ENTERTAINMENT

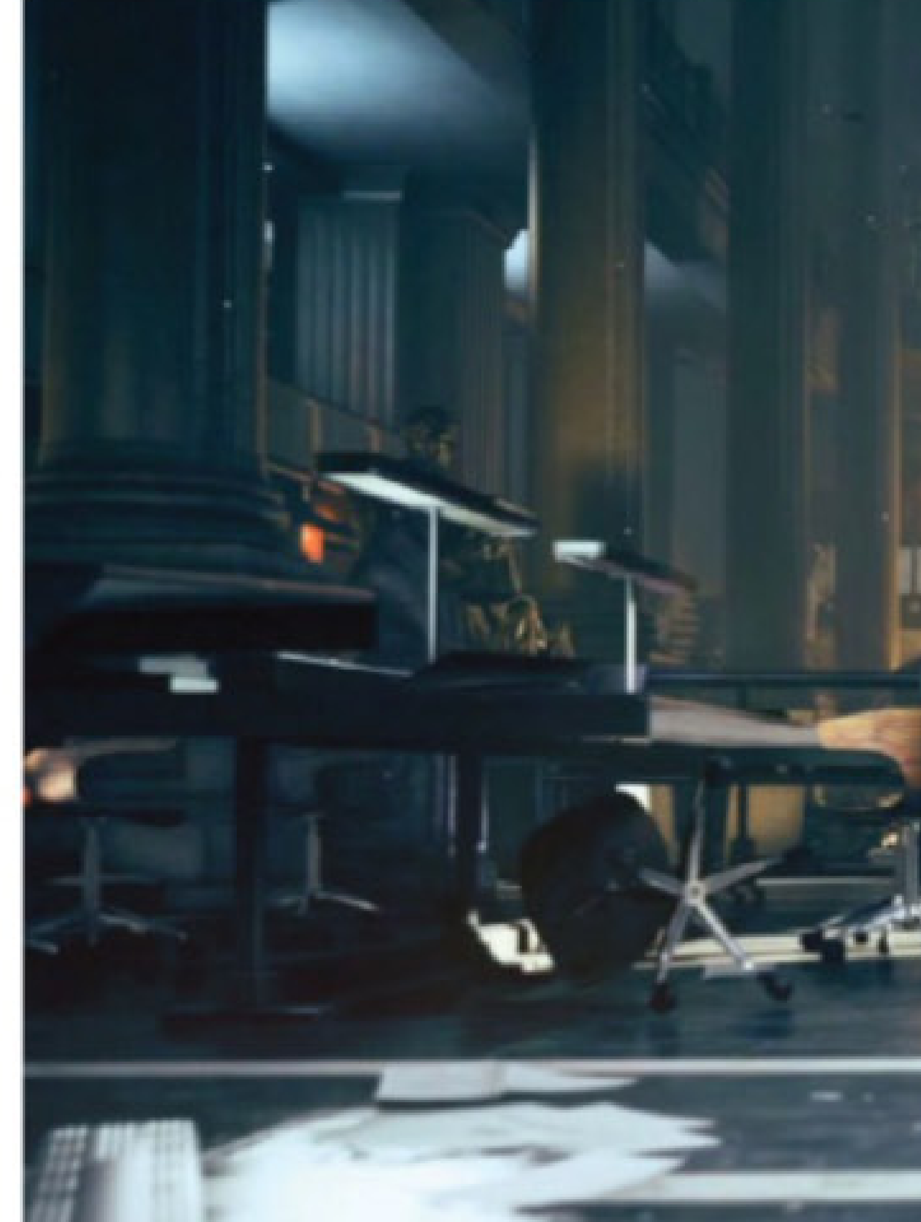
TV GUIDE

WHILE THE GAME has been in development for quite a while now, Remedy is still working out the kinks of the television show. It's set to start filming the live-action footage towards the end of the year, once it has more of the game fleshed out to be able to further match where the two different mediums conjoin. Now that Xbox One's TV division has all but turned to ash, the TV series will be released alongside the game on disk. The question is whether players will decide to consume the game episodically as the makers would prefer, or if they'll prefer to binge the gameplay and ignore the show altogether.



Above: We're not sure why everything a little bit sci-fi has to include hexagons (see also: *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, *Mass Effect*). Maybe it's because of their inherent structural strengths to do with that particular shape or maybe it's because they just look better. Regardless, more design flourishes would be welcome in *Quantum Break*'s world to help make it stand out a little bit more than it currently is.





Above: The enemy design so far seems pretty generic, but we're hoping Remedy Entertainment's latent creativity will hold fast and give us something more interesting than your standard armoured soldier to shoot at.
Right: We wonder if the time-control conceit will penetrate further than one layer. If you can slow down time within an already affected area, will it create some kind of temporal inception?
Below: Whether the game's themes appeal to you or not, you can't say the game doesn't look good, with the lighting effects in particular making good use of Xbox One.



Stutters and he finds himself facing off against two heavily armoured Monarch troops within the Stutter.

"Stutters are not so much time 'stopping' as time 'broken'," Lake explains. "There are many different stages with the Stutters – some are more calm and some are more chaotic. Inside the Stutters we have individual pockets of timelines going back and forth, or time stuttering forward or rewinding. Some of it is also standing still.

What Jack is doing with his powers is altering that broken time – it's not like you're stopping time within time. If you look carefully, when you use your time abilities on the Monarch soldiers inside the Stutter, they don't actually stop – they just slow down some more for you to have more time to fight them. It's not like you're stopping time within time – it's just that time is already experiencing a very broken state and you can use your time manipulation powers to gain an extra advantage with the Stutters."

These Stutters will also present players with some unique options during combat, as Lake reveals: "Again, some Stutters are more chaotic and others are less chaotic," he says. "Obviously, we have picked this particular sequence to show you different aspects of that. As you play the game more and time gets more broken, there is escalation as you go, and you will certainly experience fights in more chaotic and difficult situations than you saw here."

/// "In Stutter combat there are always unique aspects – like different things that can be destroyed, or the car that can be thrown here and explode on enemies," he continues. "In a calmer state, the Stutter always tries to go back to its original state. For example, you might explode the car and the explosion freezes in time and does damage to anyone nearby, but then after a moment time rewinds back to its original state. In that sense there are dangers that can be used by you multiple times against enemies, because the Stutters are often going back and forth."

We can see that *Quantum Break* will be an engaging experience, with its fusion of cinematic action that, hopefully, will be bolstered by a significant dramatic weight courtesy of the live-action show. This is a game about heroes; the show is about villains. It's a keen observation of consumers' tastes – the game leading with aspirational ideas, while the show (in the vein of *Dexter* and *Breaking Bad*) will follow the machinations of criminals building their empire.

At best, it'll be a unique, ground-breaking experiences that'll marry two mediums which have historically struggled to accommodate each other over the decades. Who doesn't want a TV show where you have direct input into the events transpiring, potentially shifting the storyline in multiple directions based on your own level of investment in the characters? It's a fascinating prospect and one we're hugely excited about.



2



1

Battlefield Hardline

CONCEPT ■ Moving away from the traditional warzones of previous *Battlefield* games, *Hardline* moves to the urban – pitching you into a cops-and-robbers type battle through built-up pedestrianised areas

Streets of rage

In an age where developers seem to be going out of their way to distance themselves from the tired tropes of the past, the likes of *Call Of Duty* and *Battlefield* seem to be running up against the harshest criticism. If you've established a gameplay formula that's been well-received in the past, deviation from that could leave hardcore fans feeling short-changed, whilst players with a more detached interest in the game see the 'same old franchise' and stay away.

It's a hard balance to strike, but in the hands of Visceral, *Battlefield Hardline* looks to be hitting upon both sweet-spots – retaining enough of its original identity to keep players on-board, whilst playing with enough new mechanics to entice old players back into the fray. Earning its *Battlefield* stripes with the final piece of *Battlefield 3* DLC (*End Game*), Visceral has proved it can work within the series' parameters. Here's five new things *Hardline* is daring to do…

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi
Origin: USA
Publisher: EA
Developer: Visceral Games
Release: Q1 2015
Genre: Action
Players: 1-8

Developer Profile

Formerly EA Redwood Shores, Visceral gained the attention of the gaming masses with *Dead Space*, but had in fact been developing long before that. Established in 2001, the studio worked on the licensed *James Bond* and *Lord of the Rings* games that EA acquired the rights to before starting up its own IPs

Developer History

Army Of Two: The Devil's Cartel **PS3, 360 [2013]**
Dante's Inferno **PS3, 360 [2010]**
Dead Space **PS3, 360, PC [2008]**
Lord of the Rings: The Third Age **[2004] [PS2, Xbox, Gamecube]**

High Point

Dead Space took the ideas found in the survival horror genre and imbued them with a sci-fi twist, creating a gothic space saga of unparalleled detail

1 THE GAME TURNS ITS FOCUS ONTO 'THE WAR ON CRIME'

STEPPING ASIDE from the military focus of the past, *Hardline* will focus heavily on the 'war on crime', taking the over-used metaphor to hitherto unseen extremes. A shooter wouldn't be that fun without access to ridiculous firepower though, and as such, you'll have access to military-grade vehicles and weapons throughout the game. It's just a little more inventive as to why criminals or policeman are using them… which is no bad thing, as far as we're concerned.



4



5

3

> "Visceral's bringing their approach to single-player and an all new setting to the rock-paper-scissors foundation that is Battlefield"
>
> STEVE PAPOUTSIS EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

2 IT BRINGS BACK THE FUN SIDE OF ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION

THIS POINT is best illustrated with a story – in a level we played, we say a firefight break out near a construction crane. Two criminal-faction players retreated behind cover and a canny enforcement player ran to set a C4 at the foot of the crane. He triggered the explosion as the cons sprang from behind their hiding spot and they all died, going down together… but not before the crane itself collapsed, pulling in parts of the surrounding buildings and carving a hole right in the middle of downtown LA.

3 THE SINGLE-PLAYER NARRATIVE IS A VALID CRITICISM OF MODERN SOCIETY

PLAYING AS Nick Mendoza (has there ever been a more 'gritty cop'-sounding name?), players will team up with tough-guy partner Marcus Boone to track down a criminal obsessed with the idea of purifying the 'once-united states'. So far, so typical. But the story sees you take on American anarchists – those who pin the country's failings on liberalism, open borders, democrats. One enemy base is decorated with flags used by the Tea Party movement, for example – an interesting and on-the-nose look at America's divided idealisms.

4 IT GIVES YOU ACCESS TO THE SWAT TOY BOX

TRACKING DOWN criminals isn't as easy as the old Seventies cop shows made out – things have gotten more technologically advanced and, frankly, more dangerous since then. In light of that, Visceral is giving you the option to either go in loud, or play it cool and take the silent-but-deadly approach. You can use police scanners, handcuffs, tasers and – we hope – mace to bring the myriad perps out there to justice. It looks set to travel the path of *Payday 2*, but with a distinctly *Battlefield* flavour – something we think is going to be popular amongst old fans and newcomers alike.

5 IT INTRODUCES INTERESTING NEW MULTIPLAYER MODES

MOVING AWAY from entrenched military combat means Visceral needed to re-evaluate the standard multiplayer modes that *Battlefield* has so far revolved around. *Hardline* will introduce 'Heist', where players must steal money from armoured trucks and ferry the loot to pre-determined extraction points. 'Blood Money' forces two teams to battle over one crate of money – the first to acquire $5 million winning – and 'Hotwire' will bring vehicular combat back to the franchise. High-speed police chases through the American streets with all of *Battlefield's* trademark vehicle handling… we'll take that.





Above: The mountainous setting of *Far Cry 4* lends itself to a wide variety of level design – from the snow-capped mountains at the peaks, to the valleys flush with rich vegetation.

INFORMATION

Details

Format:
PS4, PS3, Xbox One, Xbox
Other Formats:
Xbox 360, PC
Origin:
Canada
Publisher:
Ubisoft
Developer:
Ubisoft Montreal
Release:
18 November
Genre:
FPS action-RPG
Players:
1-4

Developer Profile

Opened in 1997, Ubisoft Montreal employs over 2,600 staff. Its first game was *Tonic Trouble* in 1999, but since then the company's gone on to work on some of the biggest series in gaming.

Developer History

Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell
2002 [Xbox, PC]
Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time
2003 [PS2, Xbox, PC]
Far Cry Instincts
2005 [Xbox]

High Point

Assassin's Creed II took everything that made the first game a notable cinematic experience and applied improved elements of interactivity and game mechanics to it – making it an instant classic

Far Cry 4

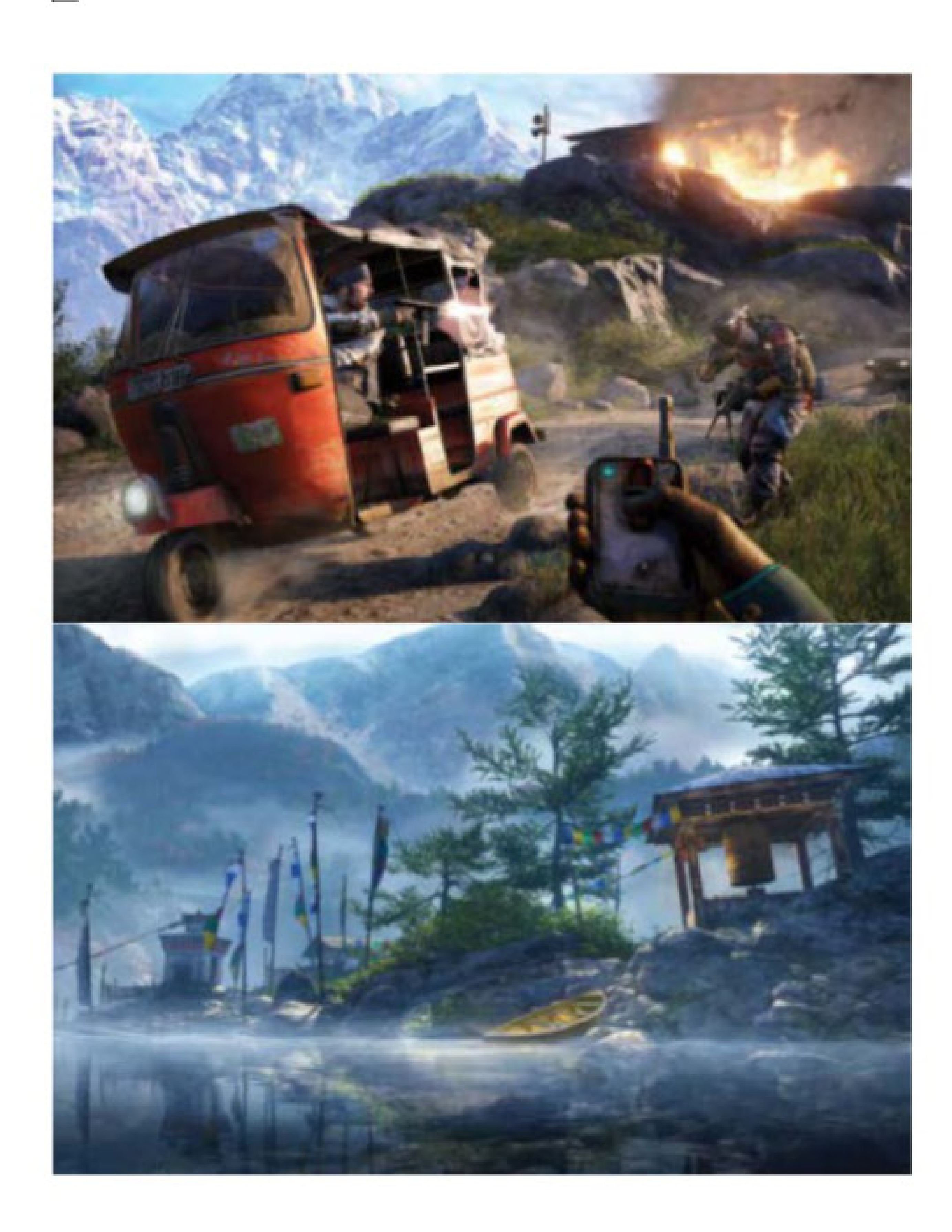
CONCEPT ■ Ajay Ghale gets caught up in a civil war between freedom fighters and king Pagan Min

Civil War Servants

We recently got to play some of Ubisoft's latest entry in the *Far Cry* series, and we noticed one thing more than anything else: the studio is taking it to the extreme. Remember how *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon* deconstructed the tropes of both Eighties action films and open-world games? Well, *Far Cry 4* continues that trend (minus the action film bits) and continues to take the series in a semi-serious direction that suits the sandbox gameplay perfectly.

For every mission, the game sets out a seemingly polar question: do you go in loud, or do you take the stealthy approach? It's never that simple, though; the variety of options available to you is never hemmed in by scripted paths; it's truly open. You can do what you like to achieve the goals you want. In our playthrough, for example, we were tasked with infiltrating a small base in the Himalayas and killing its leader. Pagan Min had set up a stronghold, and in the interests of overthrowing his autocratic regime, we needed to undermine one of his outposts.

/// We took a glider from higher up on one of the snow-capped peak and were presented with our first choice – do we fly straight into the middle of a band of enemy guards and





engage them with the element of surprise on our side, or hang a left and sneak in on a safer path on the outskirts of the base? We needed to gauge the situation first, so – in true *Far Cry* style – we took out our binoculars and got the lay of the land, tagging enemies and estimating their number. These tags became points on our mini-map, helping us orientate ourselves in context to the enemy encampments.

We came to the conclusion there were too many patrolling guards to engage in a firefight, and flew in to flank them. We took a crossbow with us so there were no muzzle flashes or gunshots to alert nearby enemies to our presence and effectively cleared out a few of the well-designed areas with ease. You can see a lot of effort has been put into the environment design to make each area suitable for both stealth or gung-ho gameplay – there's always something to hide or take cover behind, but it all feels organic, in keeping with the places you visit. It's a subtle visual language, and an incredibly good-looking one at that.

Wild animals were kept in the encampment, too – we were told by producers watching our playthrough that white leopards were the most lethal animals around, but we sadly never had the (dis) pleasure of meeting one. We did come across a pretty aggressive yak though, and took great care to stay away from its horns. Those things looked like they could *gore*. We were told we could have used some meat we'd picked up previously to lure the animals into guard patrols and have them killed, similarly to the way you could unleash tigers on your foes in *Far Cry 3*, but more tactical.

/// We eventually made our way through to the leader's room to find that we had to take him out at knifepoint. Considering the rest of our journey had seen us abusing the crossbow, this was a nice, enforced change: that's another staple *Far Cry* trope that *4* lives up to well – it'll give you as much choice as you want, then force a challenge on you by taking away your freedoms. It's an interesting way to teach you certain mechanics, and make sure you're set up well for whatever else the anarchic world of *Far Cry* is going to throw at you.

> "We wanted to create a game that will surprise players and exceed fan expectations"
> UBISOFT PRESS RELEASE

We came away from our hands-on wanting more – so much more – especially since we also got to watch the varied ways that other players around us were playing their campaigns. Elephants broke down walls and stomped on guards, snipers picked off enemies one by one, yaks went rampaging through enemy bases… once *Far Cry 4* is released in November, we look forward to seeing the multiple ways people enact chaos on the troubled county of Kyrat. It'll be the best thing about the game. By far.

Below The soldiers of Pagan Min will stop at nothing to suppress the voices of the insurgents. Voiced by Troy Baker, Min promises to be an interesting villain.



YOU WON'T LIKE ME WHEN I'M SHANGRI



TAKING ITS CUES from *Blood Dragon*, *Far Cry 4* will have sections based on the trials and feats of an ancient Himalayan warrior. These sections have a decidedly different art style to the main game, mostly composed of red and gold, with a hallucinogenic, otherworldy overlay that makes the whole thing look like some weird existential DMT trip. You have a white tiger as a weapon (!) that can turn invisible and assassinate any enemy you direct it at. Otherwise, you're armed only with a bow and a knife, but there's a mechanical conceit in that every time you pull the bow, time will freeze, allowing you to line up much-needed headshots.





Left: Never underestimate the power of animals in *Far Cry* – if you use their inherently protective nature to your advantage you can take out entire enemy camps without anyone even knowing you're there.

LittleBigPlanet 3

CONCEPT ■ It's *LittleBigPlanet* platforming expanded with a new cast of characters that evolve the puzzle-solving gameplay for the next-gen

Justitch League

As Sackboy trots onwards, unspooling his woolly persona across multiple spin-offs and platforms, it's easy to forget the extent of which the original innovated in the medium. It not only handed players the tools to shape new worlds of their own design (or in someone else's in the case of the hundreds of *Mario* clones) but also allowed them to share them with other like-minded innovators and would-be game designers. But after laying down the rules with the first two entries – rule 1: create; rule 2: play; rule 3: share; rule 4: no penis drawings – Media Molecule passed the torch, around the time the series jumped to handheld. Nevertheless *LittleBigPlanet 3* is the first in the franchise to hit a Sony home console not to be developed by the studio, so the pressure to prevent the franchise from unravelling as it transitions to PlayStation 4 is high.

Sumo Digital is the studio entrusted with the knitting needles, choosing to focus its threequel on adding depth to the fundamental 2D platforming – 16 levels of depth in fact. The toolset has been rejigged to take advantage of the added complexity of the levels and, in the next big innovation, while an expanded cast of characters widen the concept's scope.

No longer limited to Sackboy's basic array of moves, each of the new characters offers a fresh perspective on the world of *LittleBigPlanet*, dragging the series by the spongy handle firmly into the territory of puzzle game. So, without further ado, let's take a closer look at the four characters that will be making *LittleBigPlanet* that much bigger.



TOGGLE

■ ESSENTIALLY TWO characters in one, Toggle has a big and little form that both have different uses to solve puzzles. The former can weigh down switches and push heavy objects, while the latter can fit through tiny gaps (and is also inexplicably angry all the time).

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 4
Origin: UK
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Sumo Digital
Release: 19 November
Genre: Platform
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Formed following the closure of Infogrames Studio and Gremlin Interactive (while also poaching Black Rock Studio and Bizarre Creations staff following those closures), Sumo Digital is an independent UK developer with a track record in handheld ports, spin-offs and major triple-A releases.

Developer History

Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed
2012 **[Multi]**
Dead Space Ignition
2010 **[PS3, 360]**
OutRun 2
2004 **[Xbox]**

High Point

The *Sonic & All-Stars Racing* series stands out for taking the also-ran kart-racing template and making it its own. Fast-paced, exciting and overflowing with fan service, it's just as good as recent *Mario Kart* entries.



SWOOP

THE MOST curious of new characters debuting, Swoop is a little bird that can fly around the screen – a potentially game-breaking experience in a platformer. Nevertheless, this little fella can lift small objects and other characters but has to rely on others to clear objects out of the flight path.

SACKBOY

AS THE original hero of *LittleBigPlanet*, Sackboy is very much the star of the show once again in the series' PlayStation 4 debut. However, where each of the other new characters have specific abilities, Sackboy's elementary skills are augmented by a series of gadgets that enable him to interact with the world.

ODDSOCK

POSSESSING THE nature of the most obedient of pets, Oddsock is a weird dog/sock type thing in *LittleBigPlanet 3* and acts as the game's lightning-fast sidekick, activating wheel-based devices and able to climb up walls to reach areas other characters can't. He's also quite possibly the most adorable character to ever appear in a videogame.

Player likenesses are, as you would expect, rather good. Unfortunately the head-scanning technology hasn't been used for every single player in the Premier League, and lower league fans are just going to have to do without.





LEAVING A GENERATION GAP

THE GENERATIONAL LEAP last year was more to showcase a new engine and new graphical effects – the main event was still the previous gen titles. This year though, the PS3 and Xbox 360 are taking a backseat to the PS4 and Xbox One versions – features like the emotional interactions and updated keeper AI won't be on the last-gen versions, thanks to a lack of horsepower. They'll see tweaks and tucks, as well as whatever features from the core version can be crammed into them, but generally speaking *FIFA* has, once again, moved on.

Above: The action is notably nippier than in last year's rather sluggish PS4 and Xbox One version, which is very much a change for the good. Right: It's taken years for EA Sports to update goalkeeper AI, so it's no surprise that bigger changes – like women's teams – aren't even on the distant horizon.



FIFA 15

CONCEPT ■ If you're expecting the wheel to be reinvented, you've come to the wrong place. Iteration is key, not a total revamp.

It's getting emotional in football-land, but at least the keepers are smarter

Goalkeepers have been pretty much exactly the same in every FIFA game for… well, as long as we can remember. They're a fixture: effective, but nothing particularly special. Prone to the odd bizarre mistake (or five) and decidedly robotic in a game that's become increasingly human over the years. But, along with emotion, this year's big addition to *FIFA 15* is a new goalkeeper AI system. That's more exciting than it sounds, honestly.

Of course we had to ask Sebastian Enrique, lead producer on the PS4 and Xbox One versions of *FIFA 15*, how much of a risk it was to rewrite such a key position. "It's 100 per cent risky," he said. "We've been seeing in forums for years 'fix the keepers' – we knew we were working on fixing them last year, but we also knew it was not going to take one year. But with the new consoles it opened up our ability to be able to achieve what we wanted to achieve with the keeper."

It's all down to the additional memory and processing power of the current crop of consoles, allowing for elements like better decision making by the goalie and an ability to change their mind on the fly. In previous versions there was only enough grunt under the bonnet for the man between the sticks to make up his mind and stick with it – which often, if not always, meant him punting the ball out of play. But now there's a chance for him to change his mind, to decide to do something different, to back away and wait for the ball to enter the area and pick it up – it seems small, but it's a great change.

"We didn't know if it was going to take two, three years," Enrique said. "The keeper is such a tough thing to do. It's probably the most difficult thing to achieve in terms of artificial intelligence, outside of positioning for the whole team, because it's such a critical position. If you have a mistake with a defender or a striker, you forgive it because it's not critical – if the keeper makes a completely dumb mistake… well, the only thing you're going to do is throw your controller through the window, kick your console and never play the game again."

But it's not just goalies who are getting the special treatment – nor is it just the emotional attachment players act on, as EA Sports has previously gone into detail on. No, this is a game where seemingly small changes like additional animations really do matter. "A key aspect on any sports title is animation," Enrique said. "But when you talk about animation people think it's just a visual thing – in a sports title… animations mean gameplay.

/// "So the more animation variety you have, the more contact points with the ball you can simulate and the better gameplay you can create because of that." But Enrique wasn't making insane claims here, he recognised what he was saying shouldn't be taken at face value: "It doesn't mean you will have better gameplay just because of more animations – there are a lot of things that need to happen, but it gives you the flexibility to improve gameplay. You need to make good use of the animations you have and procedurally change from the animations you have to get more out of them."

Playing the game in such an early state it's hard to see any major changes these goalkeeper and animation tweaks make to the experience. It's easy enough to see smoother, more natural animation – which does make it feel less like the game is scamming you when the keeper concedes, we have to admit, and also nudges the series ever closer to the it's-just-like-the-real-thing gasping that EA is no doubt aiming for.

> "The only thing you're going to do is throw your controller through the window and never play the game again"
>
> SEBASTIAN ENRIQUE, EA SPORTS

But it has to be said that, yet again, we're left feeling the latest *FIFA* is a case of iteration and tinkering rather than the grand step up some people crave. But that's missing the point – there are changes being made, back-end changes a lot of people probably wouldn't even notice – that end up making a much tighter, fairer and more realistic game of kick-ball. *FIFA 15* won't be a footballing revolution, but it'll appeal to its fans – and that's all this series ever needs to do.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi
Origin: Canada
Publisher: EA Sports
Developer: In-house
Release: September 26
Genre: Football sim
Players: 1-11

Developer Profile

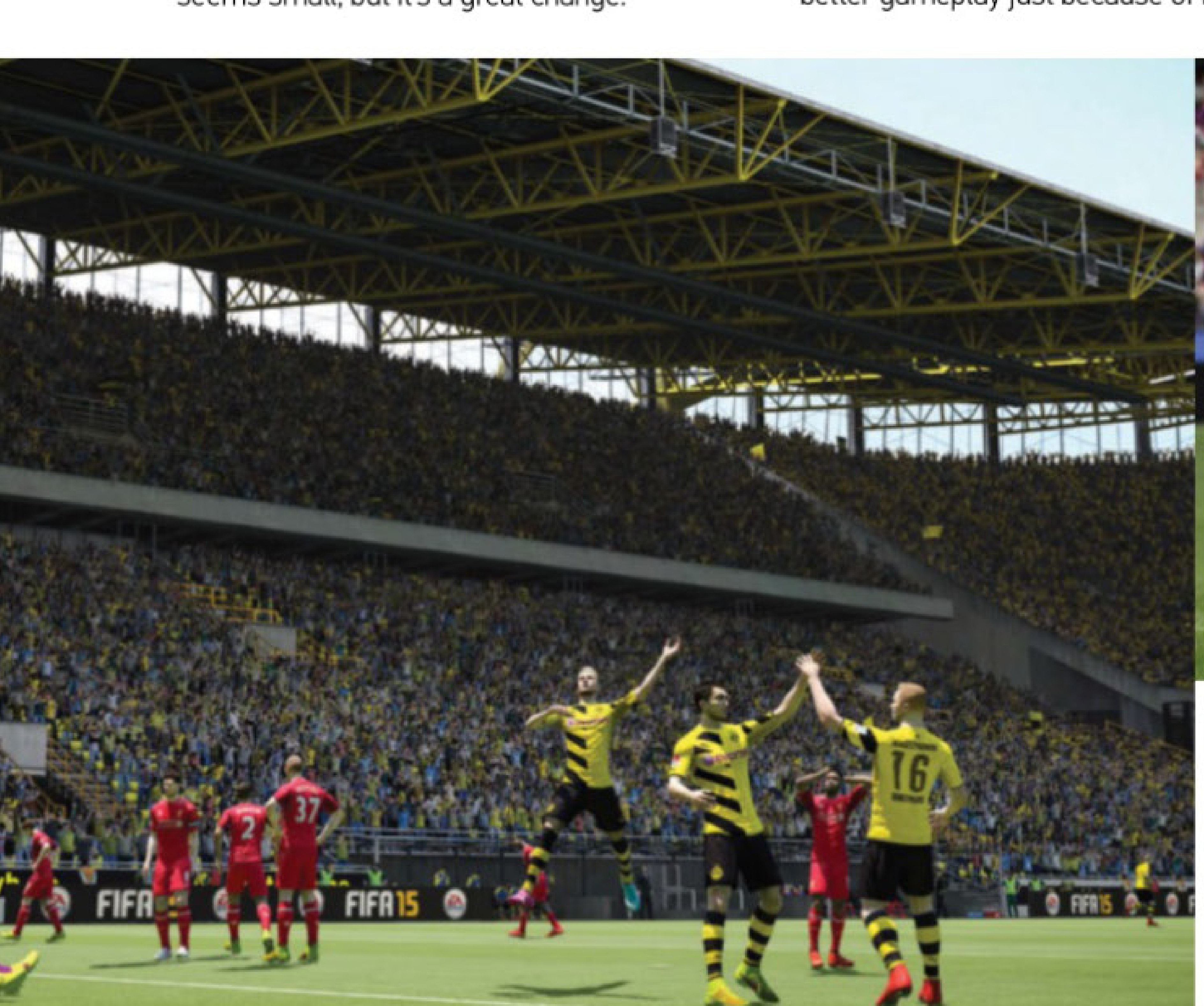
Sebastian Enrique, lead producer on the PS4 and Xbox One versions of *FIFA 15*, has worked on the series since *FIFA 06*, moving through the ranks from software engineer to the head honcho of EA Sports' biggest title.

Developer History

FIFA 14
2013 [Multi]
FIFA 10
2009 [Multi]
FIFA: Road to World Cup 98
1997 [PSone, N64, Saturn]
FIFA International Soccer
1993 [Mega Drive, SNES]

High Point

FIFA 10 was the high-point of the series in recent years, bringing together a newfound focus for the series and some excellent, pure footballing action.





■ Left: Maybe it's something that becomes apparent over a longer period of play, but from what we've seen it's hard to really quantify what the 'emotional play' features do beyond making players react differently to a given situation.

Bloodborne

CONCEPT ■ Cursed beings overrun a gothic landscape attacking those that trespass in a frenzied bloodlust. Sound familiar?

Is this the PS4's answer to Dark Souls?

While most of the internet is busy scratching away at *Bloodborne* footage for evidence of *Dark Souls* – and, sure enough, it's there if you look hard enough – they're missing the importance of everything that makes it different. Sure, the DNA of *Souls* runs deep through its veins, with Hidetaka Miyazaki's seemingly lifting many of its aesthetical elements and gameplay motifs into his new universe – from the inventively horrific boss-character designs down to the simplicity of HUD elements. But, ultimately, *Bloodborne* represents a different beast entirely and, in many ways, that's much more exciting. The flow of combat is where this is most clearly evident. There's a greater sense of pace underlining the traditional melee combat, the vulnerability caused by your lack of shield compensated with greater speed and agility to your actions. For instance, the roll move from *Dark Souls* returns in some form, but here it has a greater range and more urgency. It's part of *Bloodborne*'s refinement of *Souls*' mobility which not only benefits monster slaughtering but also has larger implications on PvP.

/// Another significant change is how the health system functions. While there's still the use of items to give you a quick HP charge, a new risk/reward mechanic offers huge benefits to skilled players. The system is relatively simple: when you take damage your health bar depletes but leaves behind a faint secondary bar, which decreases in size over time but can be replenished by successfully landing hits at enemies. It challenges the traditional *Souls* player's mindset: now, launching an attack and taking damage might reap greater benefits with a well-timed counter. The obvious balance inherent to this system appears to be one of the games strongest tactical mechanics.

Once again, this plays into the importance of melee combat. There hasn't been much evidence of sorcerer-type or ranged characters, meaning that the focus may be completely on one player-type. In fact, the only ranged weaponry we've seen comes in the form of guns, which are restricted to secondary weapons. Both scarce ammunition and meagre damage limit firearms to a strictly strategic option, used to quickly exploit a weakness in defence rather than a full-on offensive manoeuvre. Still, we expect plenty of customisable options when it comes to the weaponry featured in the game. It appears that every weapon has an alternate form, one with a small range and quicker attacks while an extended version doles out bigger damage but takes longer to swing. There's even the option to perform a mid-combo special transformation attack – adding a blade to a pole to create a devastating scythe. Not only that but the process of transforming your weapons features some technically impressive and slick animations to boot.

/// It's telling the way combat is being fundamentally altered – the structure of *Bloodborne* is likely to leave unsuspecting Souls fans reeling. One particularly interesting note is the way that boss battles function. While they'll be created in the same vein as the hulking, grotesquely conceptualised beauties that Miyazaki dropped into his *Souls* universe, they won't always be trapped behind a fog gate waiting to attack. Apparently, some will ambush you without warning, meaning that it's not just a case of trial-and-error but being bloody good throughout. Not only that but they appear a bit more traditional from what we've seen. Rather than just moving in for quick, successive small attacks, the best results came from exploiting moments of weakness and landing a critical hit. It's no massively different to what appeared in the *Souls* games but it's a little more signposted in *Bloodborne*.

Yet, who knows whether this or any of the changes mentioned are prevalent across the entire game, or are just representative of the small slices of gameplay From Software have shown to date. Either way, it shouldn't be long until we see more reason to celebrate *Bloodborne* for what it is rather than what it isn't.

> "There's a greater sense of pace underlining the traditional melee combat, the vulnerability caused by your lack of shield"

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 4
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Sony
Developer: From Software
Release: 2015
Genre: Action-RPG
Players: 1

Developer Profile

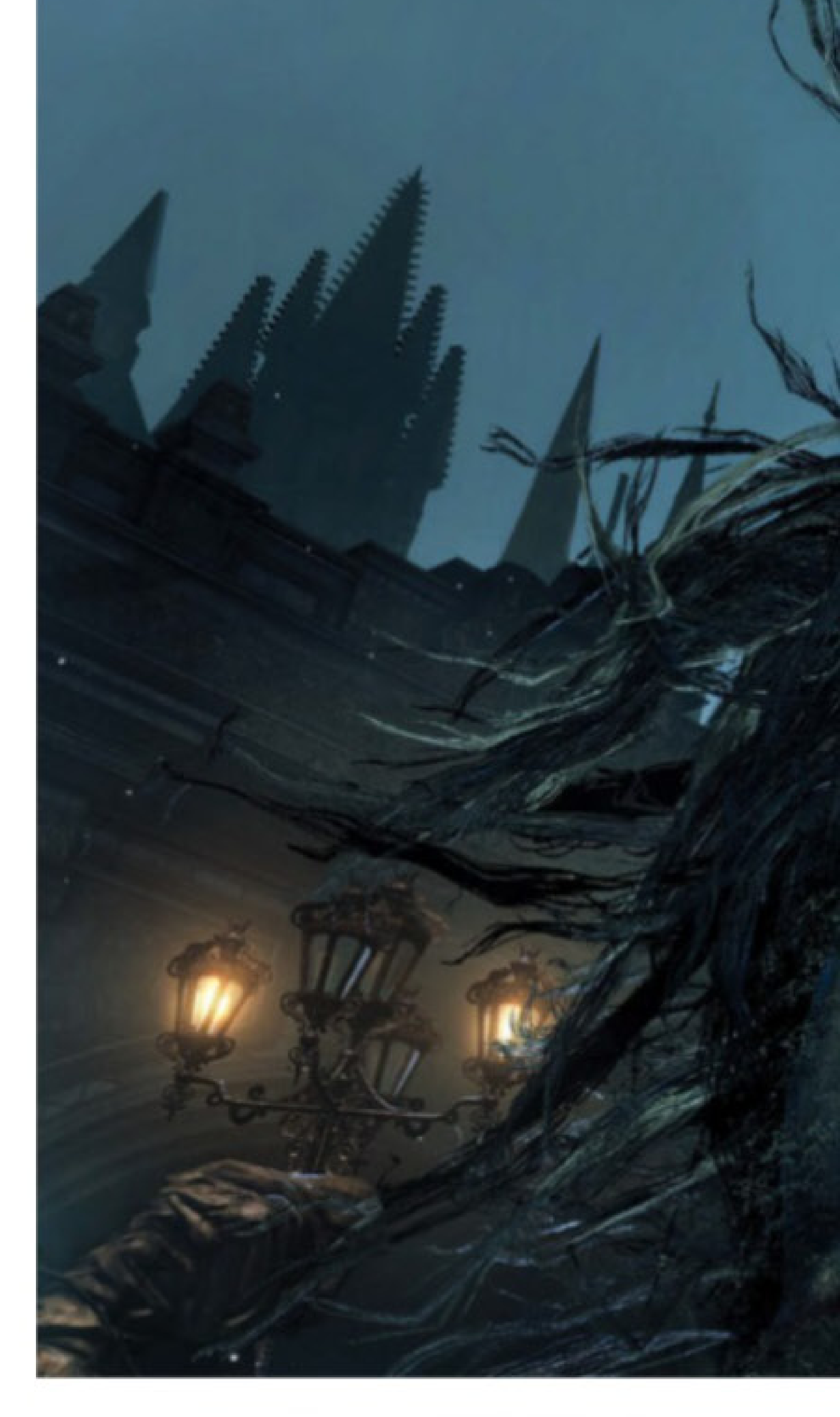
From Software has had a series of notable hits prior to breaking big in the West with *Dark Souls*. *Armored Core*, *King's Field* and the *Tenchu* series are among the studio's hits, more celebrated by gamers in its native country of Japan than over in the West. However, *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls* propelled the developer into international fame and fortune.

Developer History

Dark Souls II
2014 [Multi]
Demon's Souls
2009 [PS3]
Armored Core: Master Of Arena
1999 [PSone]
King's Field
1994 [PSone]

High Point

Dark Souls wasn't just a turning point for the studio but a wake-up call for the industry. Its complex design and rock-hard difficulty has become hugely influential to the current medium.



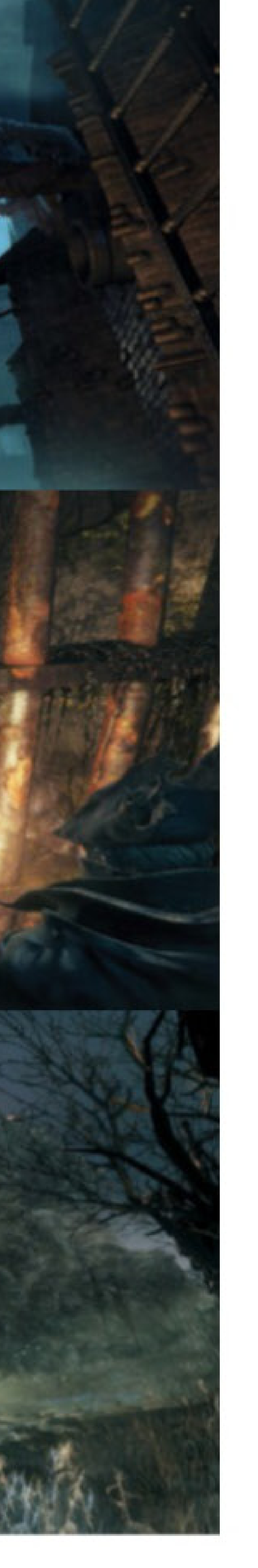


■ Right: Miyazaki has stated that the design of Yharnam shares similarities with the world of *Dark Souls*, wanting players to concentrate on exploration.


WHAT'S THE STORY?

AS HAS BEEN confirmed several times, *Bloodborne* doesn't take place in the same universe as the *Souls* series. Instead, the game transports players to a gothic city known as Yharnam, an ancient and abandoned place that, as legend would have it, contains a medical remedy to… something very important, we have no doubt (From Software has yet to reveal the full details). You play as one of these travellers, visiting the city in the hope that you can find a cure to your curse. However, he soon discovered that the city and its denizens have been seized by a terrible plague, with horrifying creatures around every turn trying to stop the hero from reaching his cure.



■ Top left: NPCs will be more interactive that in *Dark Souls*. We saw one being attacked in the demo and we're given the choice to either save him or let him be mauled to death by the creature he was facing. We chose the latter. Bottom left: The added power of the PlayStation 4 brings Miyazaki's nightmarish creatures to life unlike anything before.



Inset: You could argue that enemies in zombie games are interchangeable – this bubonic shambler could just as easily have come from *Sunset Overdrive* or *Left 4 Dead*

Inset: We reckon Yager is going to be just as subversive with this as it was with *Spec Ops* – expect to have to kill one of your own party at some point, or something similar.

Inset: *Dead Island 2* looks like a bloody mess, in the best possible way. Your TVs and monitors will pump out more red than they've ever had to.

Dead Island 2

CONCEPT ■ If the government sealed the borders of California and let those who decided to stay have their fun in a zombie apocalypse, you'd be living in *Dead Island 2*

California... knows how to party

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: Germany
Publisher: Deep Silver
Developer: Yager Development
Release: Q2 2015
Genre: Action-adventure
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Founded in 1999 by a team of only five programmers and artists, Yager now boasts over 100 employees, operating out of its HQ in Berlin, Germany. The studio has only developed and released three games to date, but is already an award-winning outfit – taking home multiple awards for *Spec Ops: The Line*.

Developer History

Yager
Xbox, PC [2003]
Aerial Strike: Low Altitude – High Skies
PC [2005]
Spec Ops: The Line
PC, Xbox 360, PS3 [2012]

High Point

Spec Ops: The Line took a more subversive look at the tropes popular in the FPS genre, and deconstructed them until they made you, as a player, feel awful for even enjoying them

Yager has become infamous for the way it tackles games – it took a fairly innocuous franchise in *Spec Ops* and wrangled the thematic nature of the game to become a more introspective, thought-provoking game. *Dead Island 2* looks set to follow the same trend, with Yager moving the setting of the game to a real-world location (California) and altering the tone to a more light-hearted zombie action-RPG, rather than the po-faced survivalism of its predecessor. We caught up with publisher Deep Silver's senior producer, Carsten Linder, to talk specifically about where the game will fit in today's market:

What does Yager bring to Dead Island 2?

Carsten Linder: When we were looking at *Dead Island 2*, we created a high-level vision and asked developers and studios for a pitch, their approach to it. We had a lot of awesome pitches, but the one from Yager was really convincing. They've got a lot of experience from *Spec Ops* – of course that's a very different game, but they're really committed to the approach. I think when we started making plans we analysed what people were enjoying the most from the first game – one thing is the tone and mood of the game. The first game plays on a small holiday resort island somewhere, so first we wanted to put it in a more known location like California, but we decided on California because it's paradise. The sun is always shining in California, it's a cool location and everyone loved it. It's good to always make everything bright and beautiful – you should have fun. Yes, there's a zombie apocalypse there, but our heroes are immune so they can make something out of it – they can at least enjoy it a bit. It's their second chance at life, to make something different.

You've described the game as 'more light-hearted'...

Light-hearted is the best description for it. We don't want to be over-the-top silly, but we don't

"We tried not to move away from [the original] – we wanted to improve what made it great"
CARSTEN LINDER, SENIOR PRODUCER (DEEP SILVER)

want to be dead serious. Like I said, it's a second chance at life – you are in a beautiful location, you should take it as a positive!

Would you say it's true to the original vision or moving away?

It stays true to the original. I think the tone of the original was a bit uneven; sometimes it was a bit darker and gritty, but most of the time it was also humourous or light-hearted, and it had this bright and beautiful location. Really, we tried not to move away from that – we wanted to improve what makes it great.

Do you think there's zombie game fatigue in the industry?

I think it's still a very interesting genre. There are lots of games, but that just shows the interest is there. We always put fresh new things in it to make it a really enjoyable experience. I'm sure it's really still a main genre. If you don't stick with old things and [instead] bring fresh stuff to it – and now with the new consoles we have so many possibilities – the experience is so much more different than before. We had so much fun making it, too – there's a lot of iteration, trying it out. We have a lot of cool weapons in the game. We've introduced more improvised weapons and motorised weapons like the grinder – a lawnmower with some blades attached to it in front, so you can slash through a horde of zombies. We wanted to make it all a lot of fun, and that's important in the zombie genre!

Have you kept the co-operative nature of the original alive?

What we tried to achieve is better co-op than you had in *Dead Island* – the original was played so much in co-op, even now when you buy it you start a game and people will just drop in. It was very advanced for the time we released it, but now there are new consoles so we can do even more. That's why we decided on seamless co-op – there are no classic modes any more, no PVP, co-op, single-player any more – you start the game, there's a play button to play then you're directly on a server with up to eight players. It's a bit like a very small MMO, and you get asked to start playing quests or missions, then all of a sudden you see a player standing there – you can decide what to do: greet them and turn around to do your other stuff, or you can go to them and chat with them, try to join up together. You don't even have to invite them into a group – we have an event structure, so if you play together in the same location, you can all share progress and stuff like that. It's very easy. PVP is embedded in the world too – like, you look up in the sky and see a chopper flying by; it's burning and crashes. Choppers have awesome loot and the chopper turns the crash site into a PVP area – if you decide to go there to look for some loot, the loot is only for one. So you can decide what to do.



YAGER MEISTERS

WE FOUND it interesting that Yager pitched to Deep Silver for the right to develop within the *Dead Island* IP – we asked Linder about this developer-publisher relationship, and how close they were during development: "We worked very closely together. We also have a creative producer on the project, a producer – me – and we have a general space in Berlin. We're there every other week, and we're working close together with the team. The good thing is that we both have a very flat structure – as Deep Silver we are embedded in the team, we can talk to every designer and look at designs together, talk together, share things together. It works really well together."

Inset: No matter how many weapons and vessels of destruction you create, big guys like this will rush you, intent on cracking open your head like a coconut and sipping the sweet brain-juices within



“[Cuphead is] a weird universe of its own, sort of sweet and creepy at the same time”

CHAD MOLDENHAUER, CO-FOUNDER, STUDIOMDHR



The platforming peril of the game looks to be amplified in boss fights, where you'll have to dodge attacks, while avoiding tumbling irritants.

Cuphead

CONCEPT ■ Inspired by the cartoons of the Thirties, *Cuphead* is a run-and-gun spectacular that takes industry norms and turns them on their head.

Brimming with potential

Aside from the Steamboat Willie section in *Mickey Mania*, there's very little in games that evokes the aesthetic of the old-style Disney cartoons. The Thirties animation style might take a lot of work, and devotion, to accurately emulate, but in an age riddled with as many stylised games as we see now, it's shame there aren't more Disney-alikes.

Enter *Cuphead*, a game that Microsoft actively pursued to add to its roster of games available as part of the ID@Xbox scheme. Its intriguing visual style is created in the same way as the original Disney cartoons were: every single frame is hand animated, hand coloured, hand crafted. The result is a bouncy and erratic run-and-gun game that feels as authentic as the old black-and-white Disney cartoons that – we're sure – live on in the consciousness of everyone growing up before the millennium.

Of course, the cartoons back in the day merged a fantastical take on real life with some more questionable traits; inherent racism, casual misogyny and understated ultraviolence to name a few. *Cuphead* will move away from these areas, thankfully, but will keep the same type of jaunty soundtrack you'd hear in *Felix the Cat*, for example.

The game will also focus on huge boss fights – being inspired by the likes of *Gunstar Heroes* and *Contra Hardcorps*, *Cuphead* will make a point out of bombarding you with huge, screen-filling animated sprites – even going so far as to try and break the Guinness World Record for most consecutive boss fights in a game.

When it's not running you through a gauntlet of relentless bosses, *Cuphead* will task you with typical platforming fare: scrolling screens, myriad enemies and environmental hazards will make up the bulk of the main adventure, with a co-op option available for friends that want to take a walk on the surreal side together. What separates it from its peers, though, is that it sells itself with one-on-one fights, as opposed to the genre standard of one-versus-many. If it all comes together well, this could end up being this generation's *Contra*.

We've played a lot of sub-par platformers, and *Cuphead* has every possibility of falling into that camp, but at least with its hand-drawn art style it's got something unique to add – and who knows: if it ends up being a critical success, we might even see a resurgence of this kind of gorgeous Disney-esque artwork cropping up.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One
Origin: USA
Publisher: StudioMDHR
Developer: In-house
Release: 2014
Genre: Run-and-gun
Players: 1-2

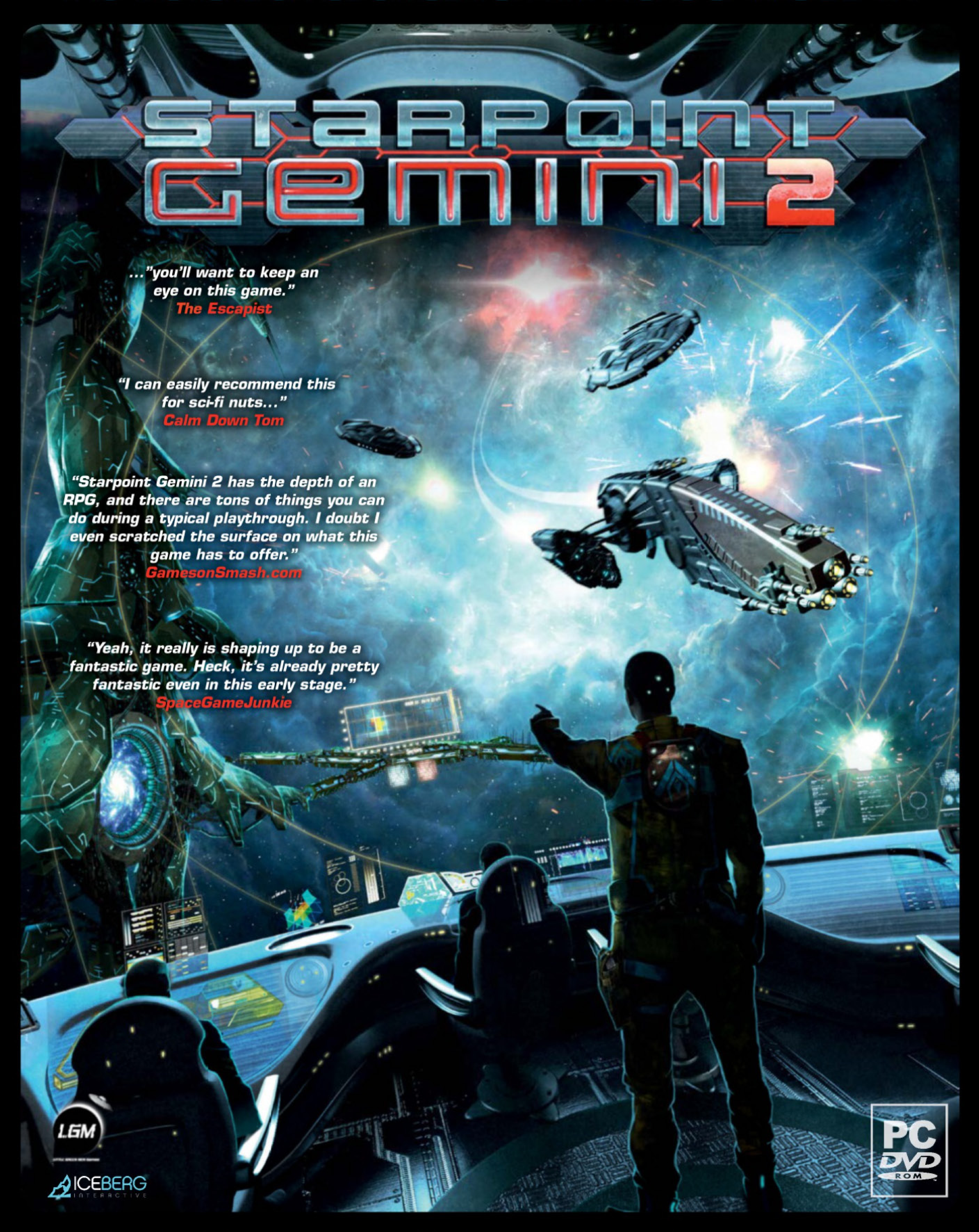
Developer Profile

Cuphead is StudioMDHR's first game – founded by brothers Chad and Jared Moldenhauer. The studio made ripples in the indie scene after Microsoft hunted it down on NeoGAF in the wake of *Cuphead*'s continued hype. The brothers are working with musician Kristofer Maddigan to emulate the sound of Thirties music in their game, all of which will be recorded live.

The variety of enemy designs and sheer creativity on offer in the game looks promising: enough to convince us to at least pick the game up.



CAPTAIN YOUR OWN SPACESHIP AND ROAM THE GALAXY IN 3D IN THIS TACTICAL SPACE SIMULATOR WITH TONS OF RPG DEPTH!



COMING SEPTEMBER 2014

■ The developer is considering persistent seasons that could last days, weeks or even months. This will also have an effect on survival, with the cold a deadly a killer.





INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: USA
Publisher: Sony Online Entertainment
Developer: In-house
Release: TBC 2015
Players: Massively multiplayer

Developer Profile

A pioneering studio in the MMO genre, Sony Online Entertainment is best known for *EverQuest*, *DC Universe Online* and *Star Wars Galaxies*. It has become a leading voice in cutting-edge MMO development

Developer History

PlanetSide 2 **2012 [PC]**
DC Universe Online **2011 [PC, PS3]**
Star Wars Galaxies **2003 [PC]**
EverQuest **1999 [PC]**

High Point

EverQuest set the standard for the MMO genre and has been celebrated in the years since as one of the most influential games of all time.

H1Z1

CONCEPT ■ From the developer of *Star Wars Galaxies* comes a *DayZ*-style MMO that has players thrown into an unrelenting world of desolation, death and a glorious weather systems.

Death and gory

There's not a lot to look right now. Standing in the middle of a field, a few shadowy figures stand far off in the distance, and a ramshackle town lies even further in sight. Our weathered survivor (chequered shirt, backpack, tidy stubble – more Jack from *Lost* than Joel from *The Last Of Us*) finds himself frustrated. We know this because he's punching a tree. That frustration is borne from the lack of undead punching bags in the immediate vicinity, so game-designer-cum-demo-master Adam Clegg has taken to an unfortunate hardwood to show off *H1Z1's* melee combos. It's an impressive flurry of fists and kicks, if ineffective against its target. But it does demonstrate the underlining simplicity that Sony Online Entertainment made a core principle of its design mandate at the start of development.

As *H1Z1's* early access release date looms closer on the horizon like an ominous swarm of flesh-eating undead ready to feast on its innards, Sony Online Entertainment has begun inviting the gaming press for a tour around its open-world survival game, offering a closer look at its core features.

This closer look mostly gives the impression that *H1Z1's* mechanics and systems are designed around accessibility. For instance, when it comes to building houses and bigger structures to hole up in when the zombies attack, crafting relevant resources into materials that can be used for walls, doors and roofs is presented in simple menus – a list of items can be browsed, offering items that are compatible with your current resources.

What's more, once you have the pieces of your structure, it slots together in sockets – not entirely dissimilar to how building in *The Sims* functions. It plays into how *H1Z1* is distancing itself from its main competitor – *DayZ*. Whereas the latter prioritises the harshness of the zombie-ravaged wilderness, here the world is a little more welcoming; the majority of players might even get to experience some of the more advanced features such as shelter building and driving around in vehicles.

/// There's also the way that the developer is approaching free-to-play. Since the announcement of *H1Z1* it has emphasised the lack of a pay-to-win strategy, and Clegg, alongside designer Jimmy Whisenhunt, reiterated during our walkthrough that it'll be items like crates and additional character slots that'll have a price tag attached.

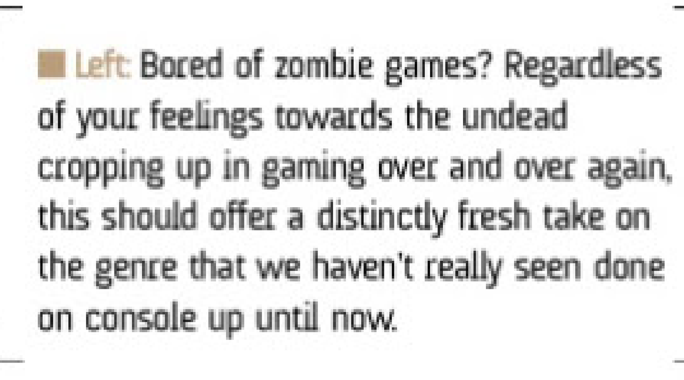
But that's not to say that players will be able to get a taste for all the game has to offer instantly. "We want gamers to get in and it be super straightforward," says Whisenhunt. "In terms of making, building and leaving a footprint on the world, it will take a long time for the player. You won't see loads of houses on day one or day two."

More encouraging is how the studio has been interacting with its community. What it hopes is that players will not just survive a few days in its world but spend months building a society. Already it has its ear to the ground, listening to requests from its forums when it comes to features to implement. Even just rattling off a list of blue-sky mechanics has Clegg and Whisenhunt being receptive – from tracking blood trails to leaving your own notes for other players, both indicate that they're exploring all options even if not everything will make it into early access.

> "We want gamers to get in and it be super straightforward"
> JIMMY WHISENHUNT, SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT

It points towards a zombie-nightmare that will give players plenty to discover. The world itself it built with this in mind, with new areas continuing to offer fresh resources to enable players to craft new items as they travel throughout the game. But more than that, SOE is hoping that players will find a different type of survival experience, one that'll have players joining together. Clegg states there are around ten major features to be implemented that tie into stability before the game launches early access. After that, no doubt Clegg and the team will have about 100 more that urgently need to be implemented at the behest of its players. The beginning of the end is nigh.





Left: Bored of zombie games? Regardless of your feelings towards the undead cropping up in gaming over and over again, this should offer a distinctly fresh take on the genre that we haven't really seen done on console up until now.

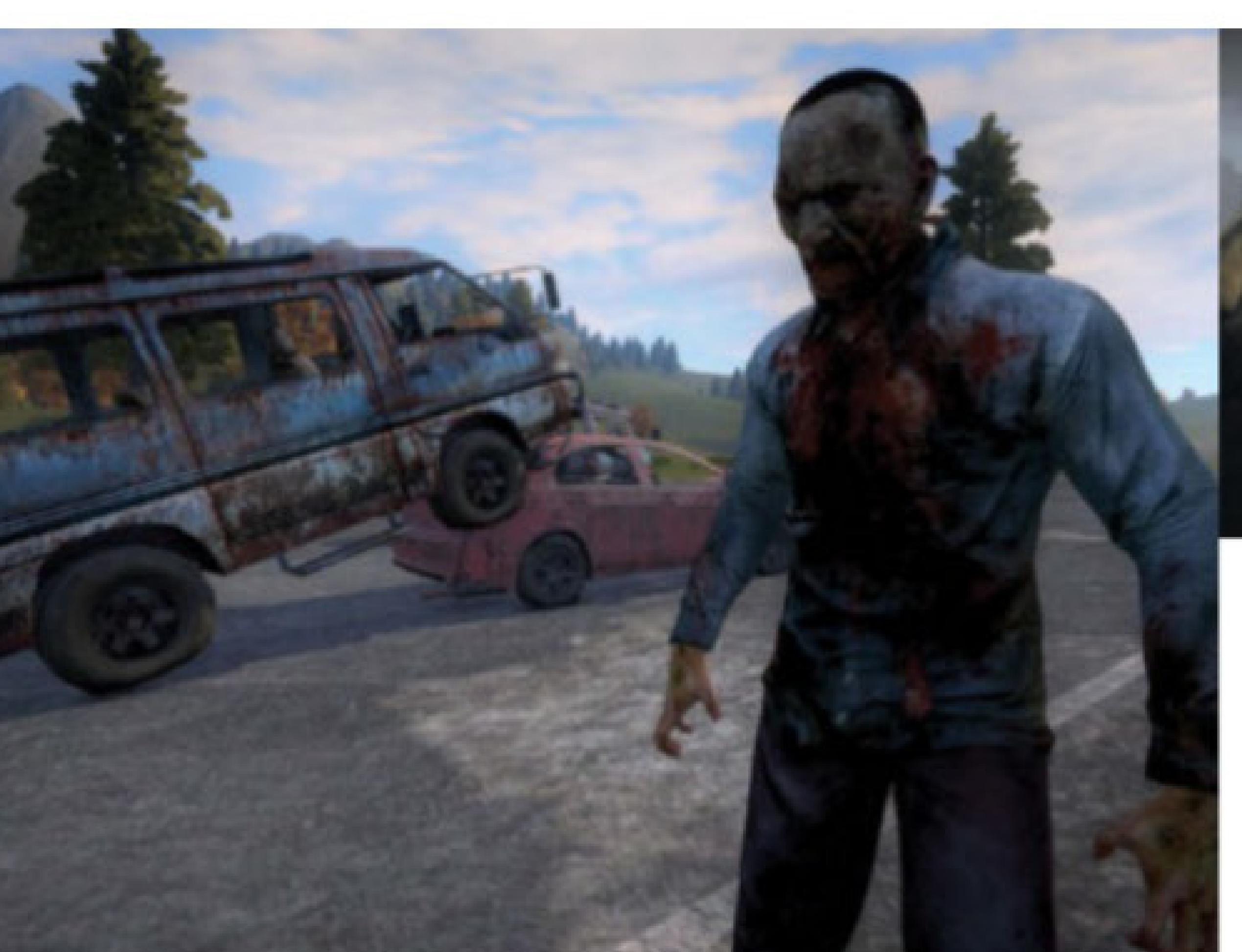






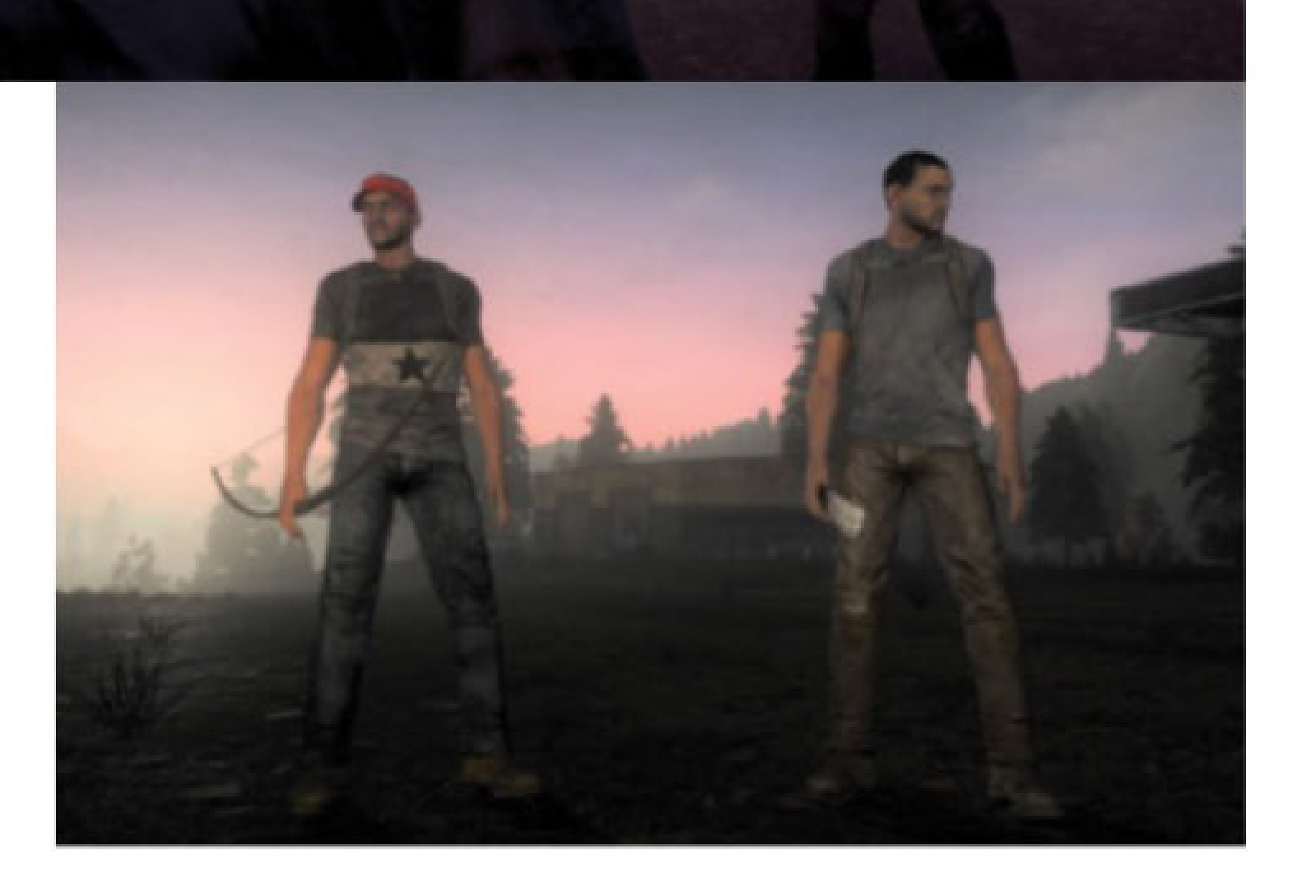
THE SERVER SERVICE

DURING OUR PRESENTATION of the game the studio offered a little more insight into how it plans to operate servers when the game is launched. There will be different servers with different rules. However, the idea is to avoid making niche small servers that'll be under populated. The process behind this would be a token system wherein gamers can vote for the type of servers they want, with the most popular being made active. This way, the studio can be reactive to the community's wishes while also being able to shape the game for a diverse range of players without alienating others.





Left: We saw a few different items that can be crafted to help with your day-to-day survival needs. From BBQs to cook the unappetising meat picked off rat carcasses, to dew collectors to offer a constant supply of water. Above: With trading a major part of the game, survival is about teamwork rather than soloing.





■ Above: According to Just, the whole combat system has been revamped to make it easier for players to get to grips with how Geralt handles. We'll still be able to do the same things; they'll just be more intuitive.

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

CONCEPT ■ Geralt is back, and he's on a mission to rid the world of the grim life that's encroaching on all decent civilisation. Bandits, beasts and blood-letters all better watch out.

Of Monsters and Men

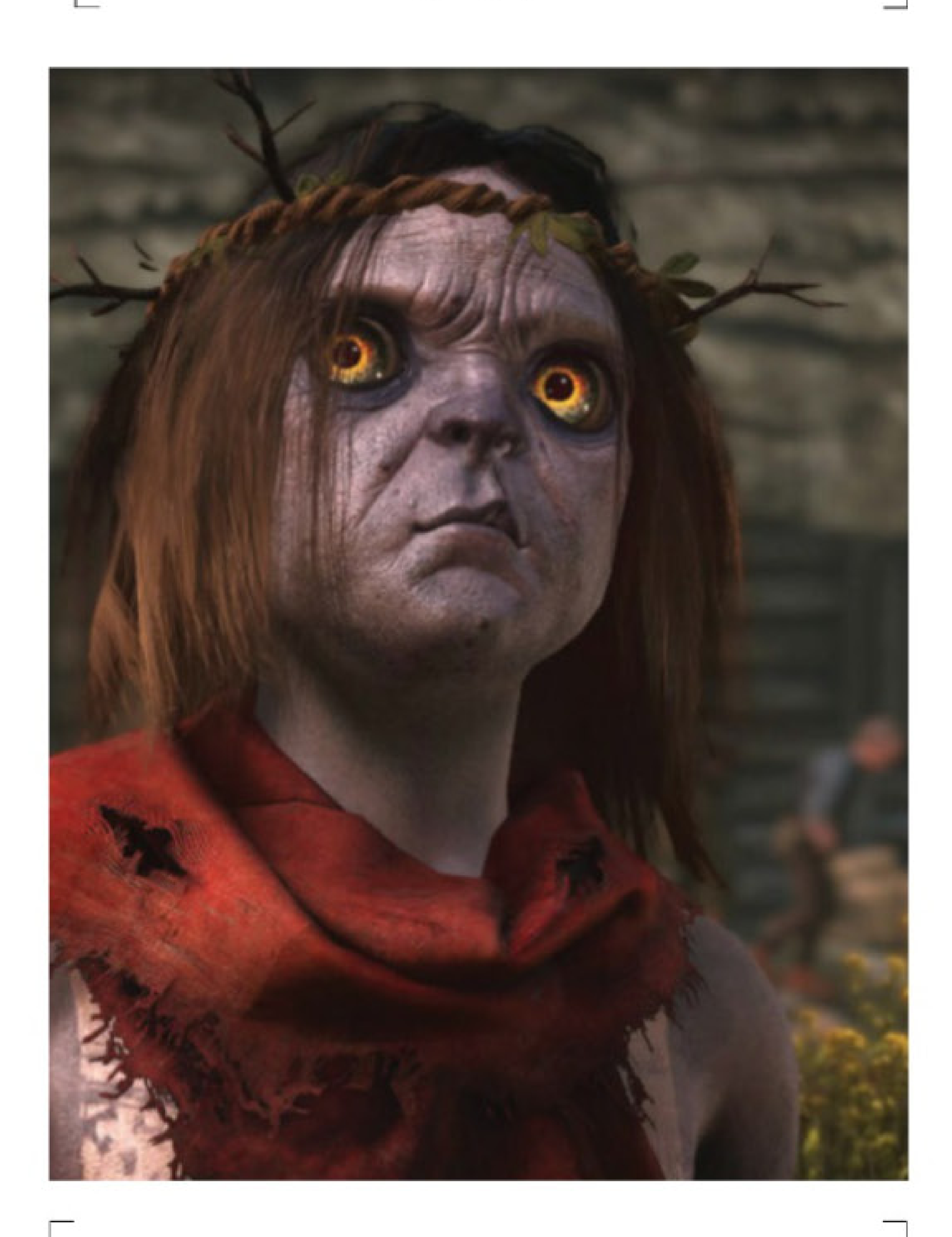
One of the standout features critics praised *The Witcher 2* for was its open world. The sprawling wintery landscape of that's become synonymous with the franchise was one of the best things about the game – evoking a sense of place that was impeccable even by the best of RPG standards. *The Witcher 3* looks set to continue that trend, with a world that boasts of being 20 per cent bigger than *Skyrim*'s, all built in CD Projekt RED's new purpose-built REDengine3.

"Our engine is designed to be able to handle the next-gen systems," explains producer Stan Just, "this is an open-world game, and we've refrained from procedural generation of our environments and the places within them. Each environment, each hut, each point of interest, everything has been hand crafted by our level designers so that every little detail fits the quests and the general approach we want to take with the world."

"Each environment, each hut, each point of interest, everything has been hand crafted by our level designers"
STAN JUST, PRODUCER, CD PROJEKT RED

It's an interesting approach to making such a huge game – requiring a lot of attentive design work from the development team, something not a lot of open-world games tend to do (usually, levels are procedurally generated and then artists touch up the assets that are created by the engine they're using.) "It requires a lot of work, that's for sure," explains Just. "At the same time though, it provides a level of intensity for the player that we need. We want to preserve the intense story-driven gameplay that we had in previous games, but now we're in an open world, and so it's harder to do that. The only option we have is to make sure that happens is to hand-craft everything." It's an ambitious method, and one that proves CD Projekt RED has an intense passion for the games it works on.

/// The positive that you can come away with from such an intense production technique is that it allows CD Projekt RED to specifically cater the world to any objective it wants – most notably tying in narrative beats with specific overworld locations. "[It's] difficult is to fill out the world with enough quests to do, while also making sure that those quests feel related to one another in some way," reveals Just. "You



■ Above: This strange creature is known as Johnny the Godling, but we have no idea why it wears such an odd expression. Looks like the face we pulled as we sat through the *Mass Effect 3* ending.



COAST TO COAST

WE ASKED how long it would take to travel from one end of the fantasy continent the game is set on to the other, and what we could expect from the new sub-aquatic sections."Unfortunately, we haven't tasked anybody on the testing team to find out how long it would take to get across the entire world that we've built," he discloses. "You couldn't get across all of it just using a horse, though, or by walking – at times you would have to climb a mountain, and at other times you would have to sail a boat or dive through underwater passageways. There's a lot of weird creatures living under the water and there are a lot of treasures and some quests that require you to spend time underwater. But [the world]... It's huge, really. It's massive."

INFORMATION

Details

Format:
PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin:
Poland
Publisher:
Bandai Namco
Developer:
CD Projekt RED
Release:
24 February 2015
Genre:
Action role-playing
Players:
1

Developer Profile

Based in Warsaw, Poland, CD Projekt RED was founded in 2002 and has since worked exclusively on *The Witcher* games, basing its work on the popular fantasy novels by Andrzej Sapkowski. The studio is renowned for its insistence on providing post-release content for free, flying in the face of now-typical DLC models.

Developer History

The Witcher
2007 [PC]
The Witcher 2: Assassins Of Kings
2011 [Mac, PC, 360]

High Point

The Witcher 2 combined all the finest parts of a game developed for PC – deep, satisfying combat, a carefully detailed art direction and an intuitive, thoughtful UI. And it all turned out just as well on console, too.

have a lot of choices that you can make in the game, and they come in all shades of grey, so it's difficult for us to work out all the intricacies and the relationships between those decisions.

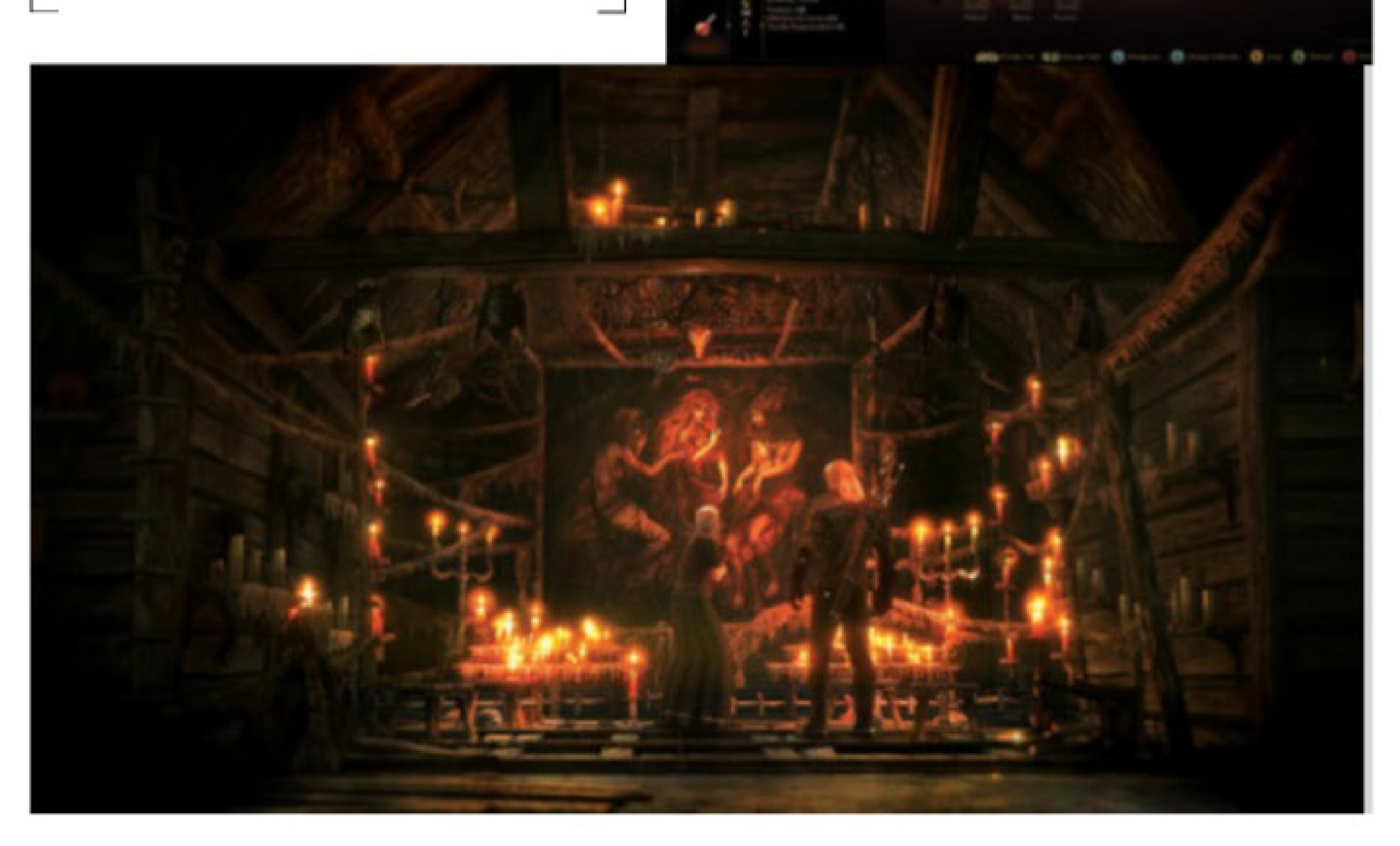
"What you need to remember is that the world in *Wild Hunt* is experiencing political turmoil – there's a war going on when you start the game. Even though you will stumble across a side quest at some point, it will be a side quest that is grounded by that wider situation. A side quest about a force occupying a village might be a separate plot in itself and have a beginning and an end, but it's also a plot that is grounded within the bigger storyline and the war.

/// "Designing things in the way that we have allows us to make sure the story is always being driven forward and informed by things that you are doing. These quests may be optional to do, but if you do them you will find they are still part of the bigger picture." It's clear that the development of *Wild Hunt* has been undertaken with narrative realism in mind – with the designers, artists and writers working concurrently to weave their individual expertise together. The result in an RPG game world that looks to be one of the most immersive we've seen for a while – and one that's as accessible to players new to the *Witcher* series as it is to the veterans.

"Even newcomers to *The Witcher* will understand everything that is going on in the world," explains Just. "It is all carefully explained to you. The most important events from previous plots will be recapped, certainly, but there's really no need to worry if you're a new player, as this is a standalone game in its own right."



Above: *The Witcher 3* operates on a full day/night cycle, with some enemies gaining special abilities at certain times of the day. Below: The fire effects show off just how well CD Projekt RED has made use of the incredible power of the PS4 and Xbox One.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS4
Origin: USA
Publisher: Finji
Developer: Infinite Fall
Release: 2015
Genre: Adventure
Players: 1

Developer Profile

The US studio run by husband and wife duo Adam and Rebekah Saltsman, it has become something of an indie powerhouse, developing endless runner *Canabalt*, numbers game *Hundreds* and the addictive *Gravity Hook*. Side-lining in publishing, it has secured an impressive roster of upcoming titles including *Night In The Woods*.

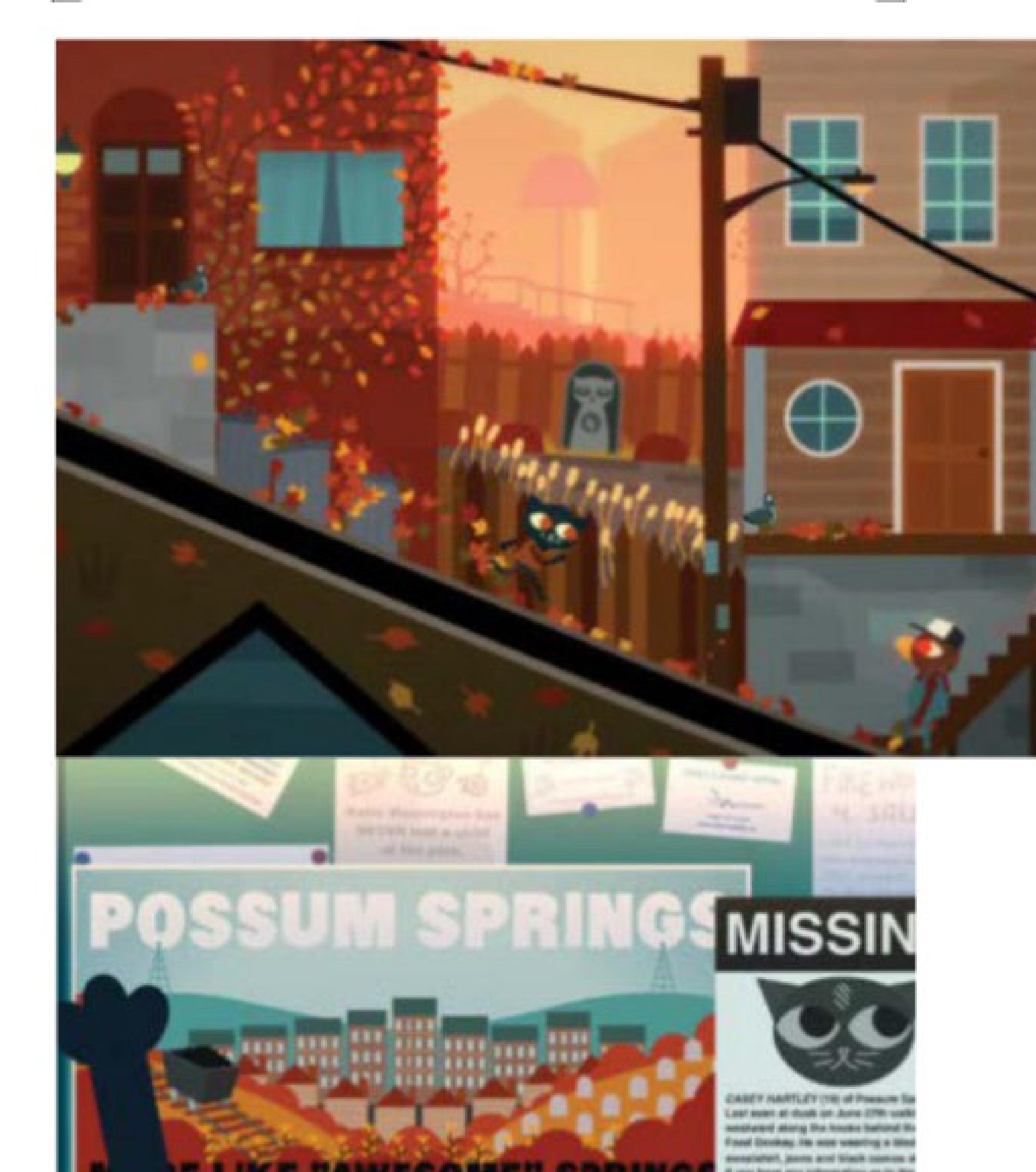
Developer History

Hundreds **2013 [Mob]**
Capsule **2012 [PC]**
Gravity Hook **2012 [Multi]**
Canabalt **2009 [Multi]**

High Point

It'd be wrong to highlight anything but *Canabalt* as the studio's greatest triumph. Not only a masterclass in stripped-back game design but its influence alone has been astonishing.

Left: You're able to use the town's rooftops and power lines to move through the world. However, there will be other characters that also hide – some of which you'll have to be wary of.



Night In The Woods

CONCEPT ■ An indie platformer that has a colourful cast of animals contemplating the meaning of life, while they're stalked by a stranger living in the woods.

You're in for a big surprise

There's something deeply melancholic about the themes explored in *Night In The Woods*. Its central protagonist Mae is undergoing an existential crisis, looking for *her* place in the world as those around her fade away, transitioning into a new stage of her life. Ruminating on intimate relationships, the definition of home and mortality's finiteness, this is a game with something to talk about – even if the characters talking about them happen to be cats.

Actually, it's not just cats but dogs, foxes, bears and birds all weighing in with their own troubles and angst, not to mention their thoughts on the mysterious figure in the woods threatening to destroy the town. It's a serious game that doesn't take itself too seriously, thankfully.

A collaborative effort between Alec Holowka and Scott Benson (not to mention a few others lending a hand, including *Canabalt*'s Adam Saltsman), the focus here is on drama, but it's offset by a wryness presented through its beguiling autumnal world.

The game is about exploration – both internal and external. While Mae makes her way across Possum Springs, interacting with the townspeople and undertaking various activities and venturing off into the surrounding areas, she is able to utilise her heightened cat-agility to get around. Rooftops, ledges and power lines offer her a quick way of navigating through the local area.

Interspersed among the platforming and general chitchat with the locals are some charming encounters. For instance, one scene has Mae scoffing donuts in a shop, the camera switches to a first-person perspective and gives the player control over her paws. It's a neat aside that is reminiscent of something you might find in *Frobisher Says*.

There's plenty more to discover yet in *Night In The Woods* – not least what actual danger the shadowy character in the woods presents. The developer has it scheduled for a 2015 release date and it's picked up a lot of buzz, which no doubt has reassured Sony that it has another exclusive indie hit on its hands.

What remains to be seen is whether *Night In The Woods* can fulfil what looks to be an ambitious venture. The short glimpses at the game we've been privy to reveal a wit-filled script and an engaging cast of characters, an encouraging sign that there's substance to the style. But will its simplistic platforming gameplay and mini-game segments match-up to its high-minded narrative. Time will tell. Either way, one thing is certain: *Night In The Woods* is one of the most exciting indie games to come along in years.

■ The art design is striking, having more in common with a stylish point-and-click rather than platforming adventure.



"Night In The Woods comes from that point where you sense things are changing and it's time to move on but you don't know how"

ALEC HOLOWKA, FINJI

Fortnite

CONCEPT ■ A free-to-play third-person action game that relies on teamwork, scavenging and a hefty arsenal of weaponry to send the dead back into the ground.

Things that go bump in the night

Traditionally, when a game is announced in bombastic fashion (say, among the vapid spectacle of the VGAs), gamers can expect to play it a year or so later. That wasn't the case with *Fortnite*. Epic's new IP was unveiled at the show back in 2011 by the company's own all-star designer Cliff Bleszinski and spent the subsequent years in hiding, shrouded in ambiguity and rarely mentioned. But that's for a good reason. It's by far the most ambitious project the *Gears Of War* developer has worked on to date; a departure from the pumped-up guns-and-machismo the studio has been firing out at gamers for the last couple of decades. Instead, *Fortnite* is a free-to-play class-based game, set across a procedurally generated world, which centres on three phases: scavenging, building and fighting. However long you take on the first two is mostly up to the player, erecting a defensive fortress around a device that, when activated, begins to close a portal to another dimension. The only problem is, once the device is turned on, the monsters begin their onslaught.

"Well, *Fortnite* started out as a very small game-jam project and has since gotten bigger", explains lead designer Darren Sugg when outlining how the game has evolved since its announcement. "However, it's interesting because for a few of the guys who have been here from *Fortnite*'s start, they say it's changed quite a bit. The pacing and the art style are the things that have changed the most radically. I'd say these two things have really been significant in the evolution of *Fortnite*, as choosing to have a cartoony art style coupled with committing to make building an activity you can do during an action game."

Fortnite was compared to *Minecraft* after its teaser trailer debuted, and while it bears a superficial similarity (although the prominence of the day/night cycle has been scaled back and left for PvP) its systems are built toward delivering a white-knuckle third act that delivers on Epic's exceptional action-game credentials. However, Sugg highlights the importance of balancing each of the three strands of gameplay to make each facet engaging: "*Fortnite*'s systems are really a toolset that lets the players interact with them rather than push a strongly guided right way to play", he says. "We want players to use the systems to accomplish those goals, in the ways they really want. So we're mostly concerned with making sure the systems play nicely together and are fun right now."

/// For a studio known for building shooters set in linear worlds, *Fortnite* represents a remarkable change of pace. Sugg admits the open-ended design and vastness of the world has presented the studio with a plenty of design hurdles to overcome: "Generating a systemic world has its own set of challenges", he admits. "Where linear worlds let everyone focus and see the same content from the same angle; a world where players can destroy buildings, wander around the entire world, is a whole different animal. Generating the systems and the code to support them is a big part of our development road map this time around." There's still some time before *Fortnite* will be ready to launch (although there are rumours of an early access or beta arriving before the year is out). There are still plenty of kinks to be ironed out, but what's clear is that this cooperative-focused title is delivering a comprehensive experience. *Fortnite* is very much alive, and if Epic succeeds in its plans, it'll continue to live long and prosper.

"This is an online game, and of course that means continuous improvement and growth", enthuses Sugg. "We knew we wanted to evolve the game over time and being able to introduce new features into the *Fortnite* universe means we must have a model that supports that. That's why we decided to make it an online game, and free to play means the largest amount of gamers can try it. As we develop the *Fortnite* world, we will add more and more features and iterate on what we have to make it that much better."

> "The pacing and the art style are the things that have changed the most radically"
> DARREN SUGG, EPIC GAMES

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, Xbox One
Origin: US
Publisher: Microsoft
Developer: Epic Games
Release: TBA 2015
Genre: Third-person shooter
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

One of the most prolific developers in the industry, the illustrious studio has delivered the seminal *Unreal* and *Gears Of War* series, while making waves on Apple's tablet devices with *Infinity Blade* in recent years. More impressive is its work behind the scenes, building the Unreal Engine – one of the most widely adopted third-party game engines in the business.

Developer History

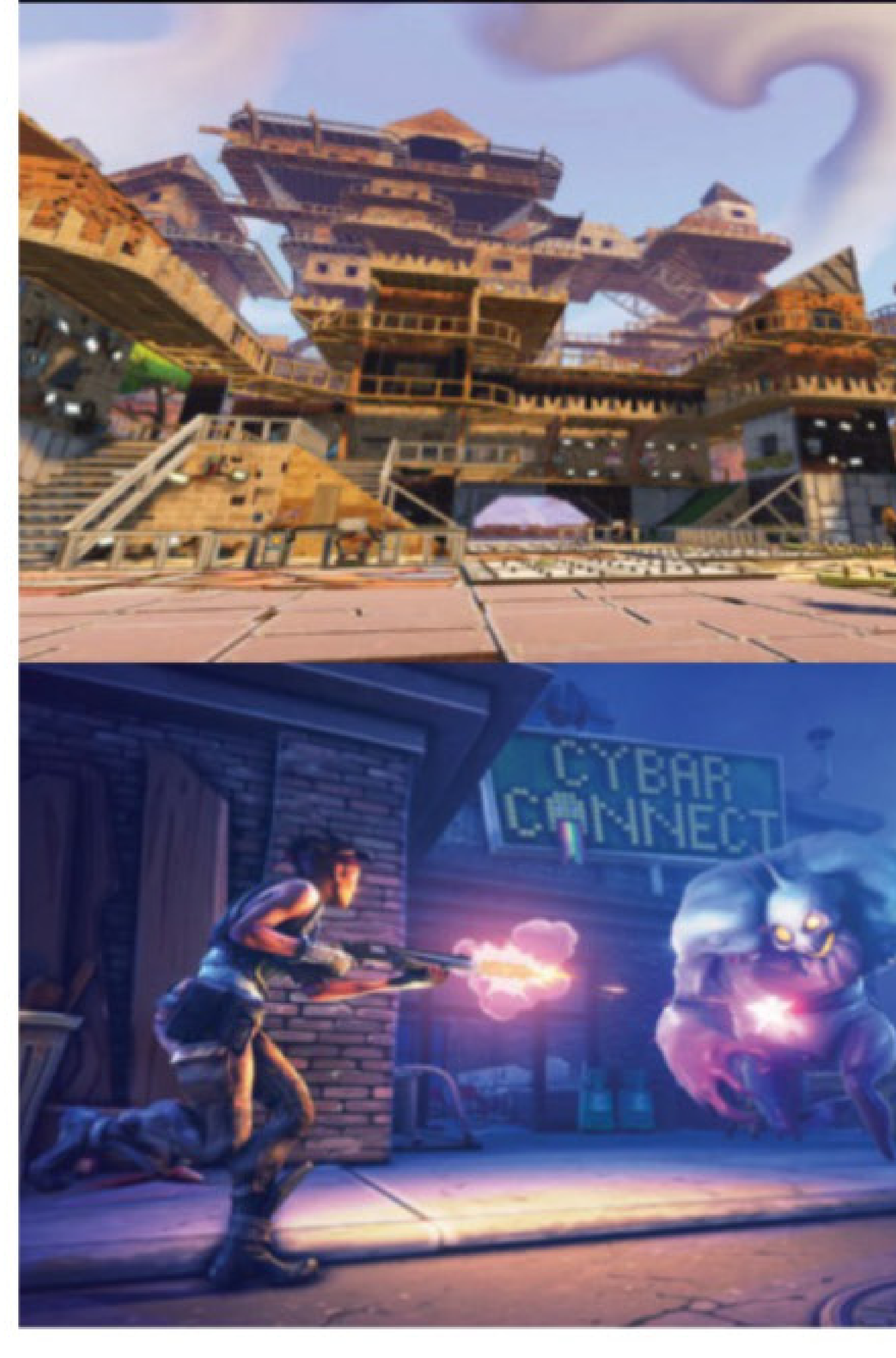
Infinity Blade **2010 [iOS]**
Gears Of War **2006 [Xbox 360]**
Unreal Tournament **1999 [PC]**

High Point

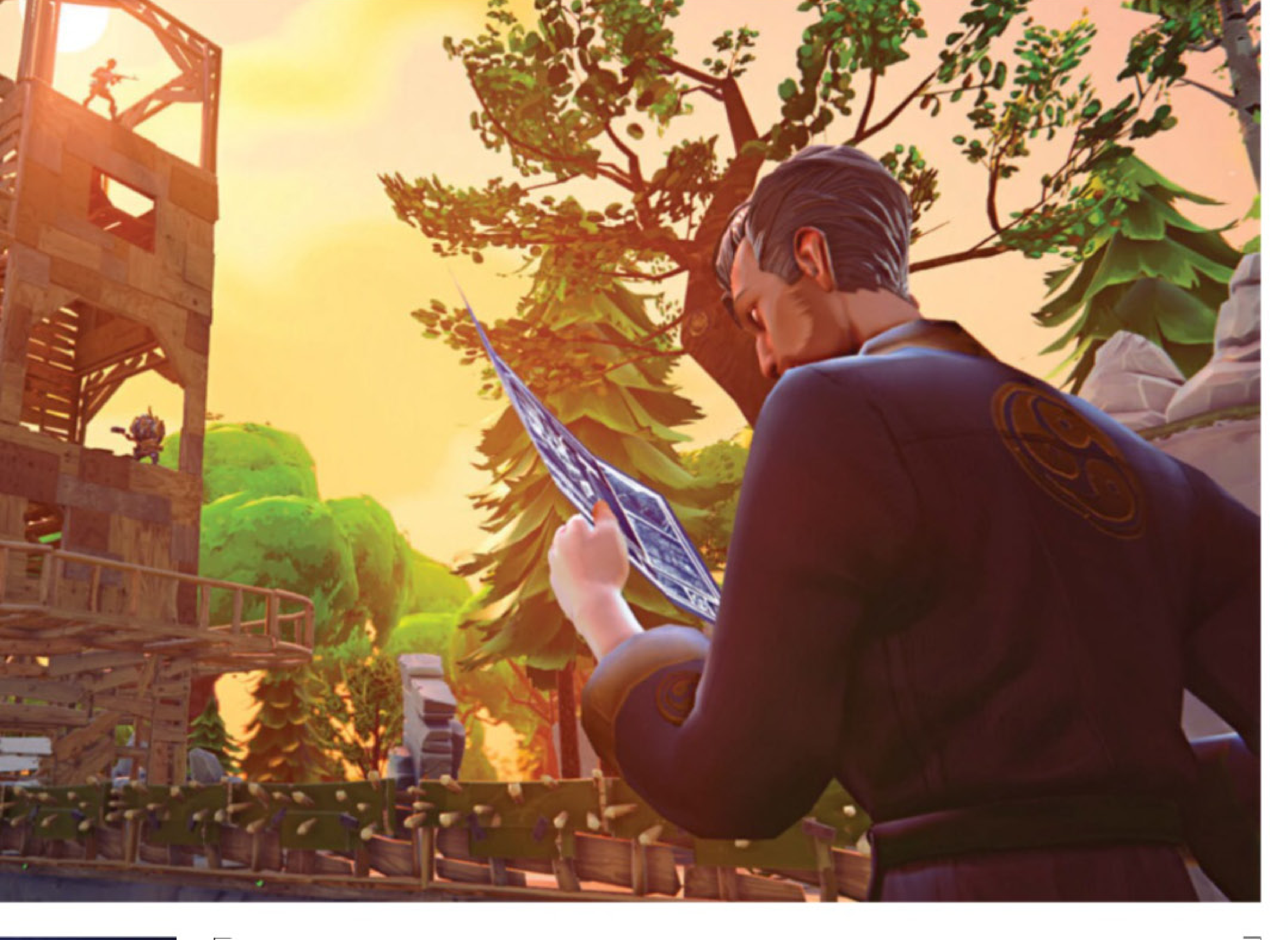
The *Gears Of War* franchise has become a calling card of the studio and the series was as original and influential as it was suitably explosive.







■ Right: You can work with a friend to help them complete their map – Epic is making sure the cooperative campaign rewards all players.



MONEY TALKS

EPIC INSISTS that the core gameplay experiences – scavenging, building and shooting – won't be impacted for players who don't want to spend real-world cash. You're still able to gather the same resources and build the same outlandish weaponry as those willing to spend money. However, card packs will be available that offer boosts and additional schematics that are used to craft items. Weapon schematics can be encountered in the wild (and can be shared with a limited amount of users) but those who spend money on card packs have a better chance of encountering one. "It's very important for us at Epic to get the model right", says Sugg of the monetisation model, "so a lot of people in the building are paying close attention to it."

Above "The real question is; can we answer this question without using a cliché?" responds Darren Sugg when asked about how Epic is avoiding cliché monster design. "Good class and enemy designs have the right amount of familiarity mixed with Epic's unique twist." **Left** Players progress across a hex map, each new biome is procedurally generated and offers an array of resources useful to the campaign, so you'll never play the same map twice.



1 WE BOOTED up the trailer to find ourselves trapped in a featureless room, a single strip light dimly illuminating the path that lies ahead. It seems to be classic horror, straight off the bat: isolation, amnesia, new beginnings, a single door slightly ajar. It's the luminal threshold to a terrifying new experience...

INFORMATION

Details

Format:
PS4
Origin:
Japan
Publisher:
Konami
Developer:
Kojima Productions
Release:
TBA
Players:
1

Developer Profile

A subsidiary of Konami, Kojima Productions is most well-known for its work on the *Metal Gear Solid* franchise, but has also provided assistance to other studios and projects – *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow*, *Zone Of The Enders* and *Snatcher* to name a few. The company operates under the direct supervision of Kojima.

Developer History

Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes
2014 [Multi]

Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance
2013 [Multi]

Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow
2010 [PS3, Xbox 360]

Metal Gear Acid
2005 [PSP]

High Point

Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater was praised for its visual prowess, which took advantage of Kojima's vast cinematic knowledge to present a game so beautifully shot, many gamers had never seen anything quite like it.

Silent Hills

CONCEPT ■ Hideo Kojima and Guillermo del Toro team up in efforts to redefine horror, announcing the game with the world's first interactive trailer



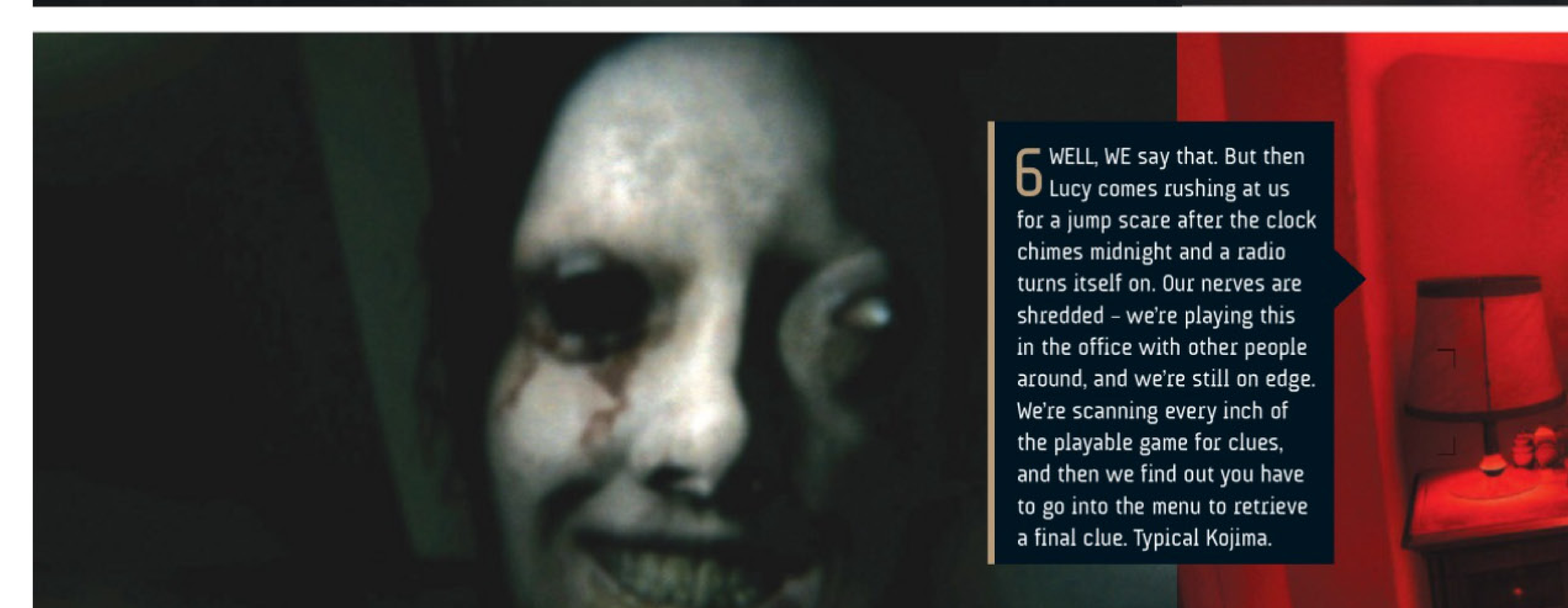
From PT to PTSD

At the Sony gamescom conference, a strange new title was announced – and uploaded to the PS Store straight away. Carrying the enigmatic 'P.T' label, all that was revealed was an interactive horror experience, set in a single repeating corridor. It was at first glance entertaining and disturbing, but there were secrets lying beneath the game's surface, and no-one knew just how much of an impact this innocuous-looking title would have on the industry in general.

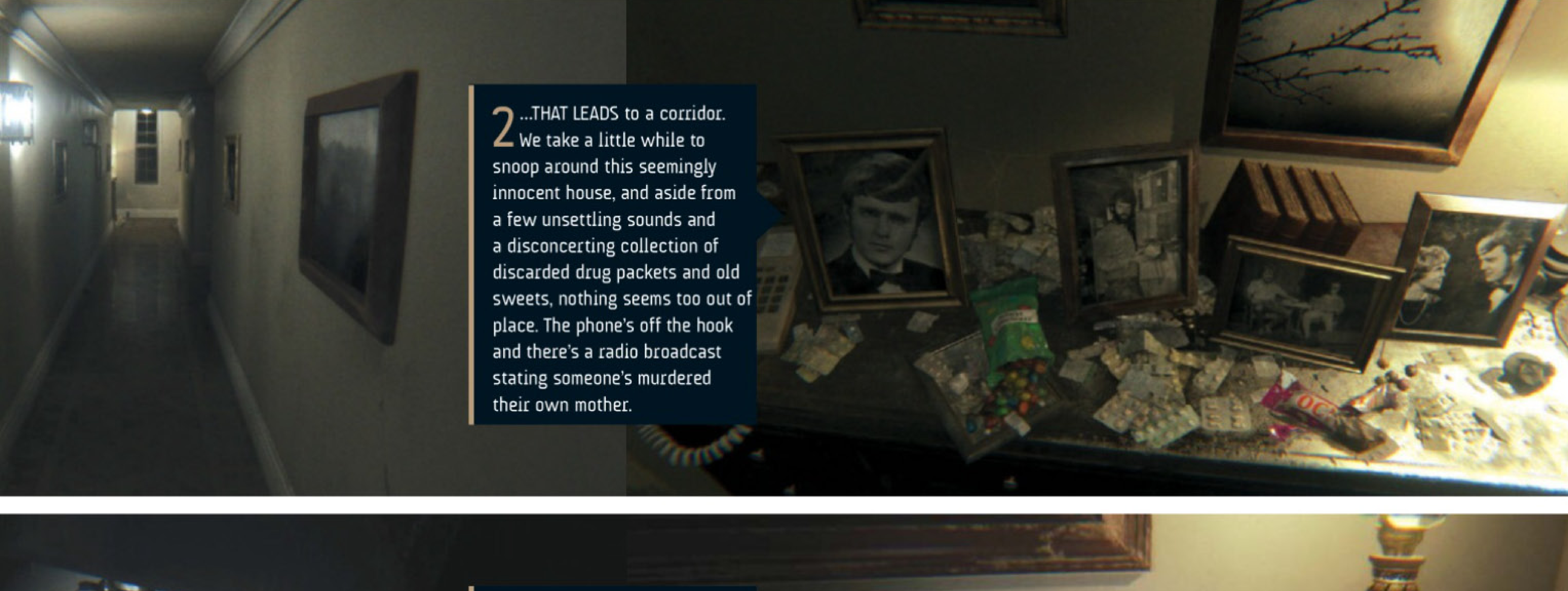
After a few enterprising gamers around the world managed to pierce the veil of the 'playable teaser', they were rewarded with a trailer proper for the new *Silent Hill* game co-created by Hideo Kojima and Guillermo del Toro: *Silent Hills*. There are no peeling walls or Pyramid-headed monstrosities in the game (yet), but rather this plays like a psychological horror movie – quietly unsettling and bizarre, indirect and insidious. We combed through the horrifying trailer, trying to glean as much as possible about *Silent Hills*...



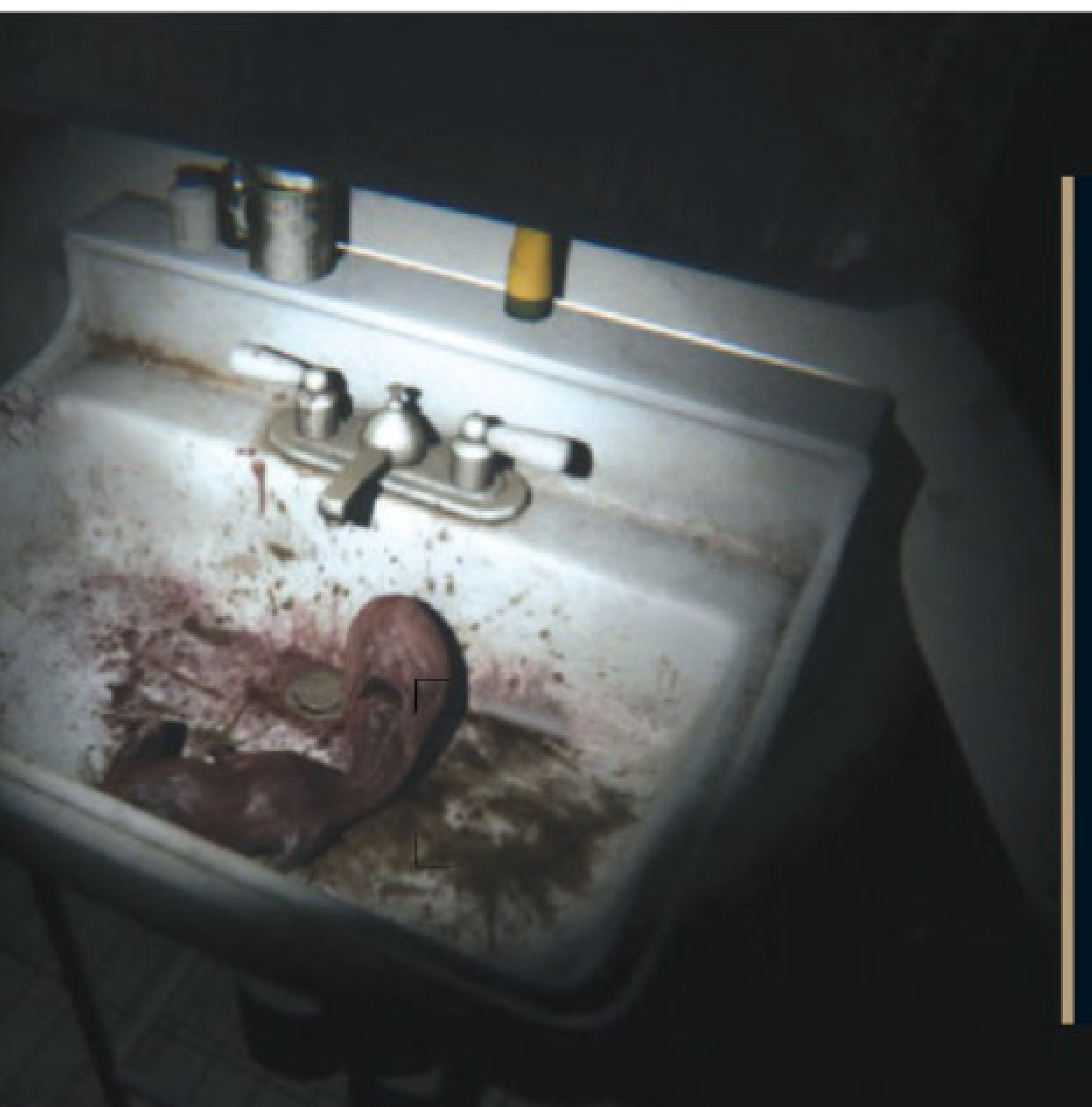
4 WE GET stuck (as did the majority of people playing the game – it's a tricky little project). We notice some scrawling on the wall. Since all you can do is observe (something that might get carried over to the full *Silent Hills* game?), we figure out you must transfer the word 'HELL' onto a wall, from another message saying 'HELLO'. Because *obviously*.



6 WELL, WE say that. But then Lucy comes rushing at us for a jump scare after the clock chimes midnight and a radio turns itself on. Our nerves are shredded – we're playing this in the office with other people around, and we're still on edge. We're scanning every inch of the playable game for clues, and then we find out you have to go into the menu to retrieve a final clue. Typical Kojima.



2 ...THAT LEADS to a corridor. We take a little while to snoop around this seemingly innocent house, and aside from a few unsettling sounds and a disconcerting collection of discarded drug packets and old sweets, nothing seems too out of place. The phone's off the hook and there's a radio broadcast stating someone's murdered their own mother.





3 WE HEAR an unsettling sound coming from the bathroom and head over to investigate. It's a foetus in a sink, which we, umm, weren't expecting. By this point, we've realised you'll 'reset' the room you're in by entering a door at the end of the corridor. Every time you go around, a ghostly woman (known as Lucy, pictured) will jump-scare you. Lovely.





5 WE COMPLETE the 'puzzle', go through the door, and begin the corridor again. This time, things go wrong. That 'HELL' marker wasn't joking – we're in the corridor, all looping walls, red lights, a swinging fridge full of blood and a crying child. Possibly (probably) coming from the fridge. This is psychologically unsettling in a way that *Silent Hill* has never been.





7 WE FINISH the game – twitchy and sweating – to be treated with a proper trailer for the full *Silent Hills* game. It's revealed a bag on a table tells you what to do (?) and Norman Reedus of *Walking Dead* fame will be filling the shoes of your uncertain protagonist. The game is made in the FOX Engine, and predictably looks gorgeous, and if the final product is anything like *P.T.* prepare for horror that'll *really* mess with your head.



"Our concept is based on experiencing new situations each time you play"

MICHEL ANCEL, WILD SHEEP STUDIO



There will be plenty of mystery and supernatural elements by all accounts, as you can see by this bipedal wolf emerging from the pack.

Wild

CONCEPT *Rayman* creator Michel Ancel unleashes players into the world to experience a time when humanity was at harmony with nature.

The dawn of (Ray)man

There's a sizeable pig trotting around in Michel Ancel's latest title, but, be warned, this isn't the swine that you might be hoping for. The latest passion project from the French developer isn't *that* sequel fans continue to wait patiently for, but instead a brand new venture titled *Wild*, the first game sprung from his new indie outfit Wild Sheep Studio.

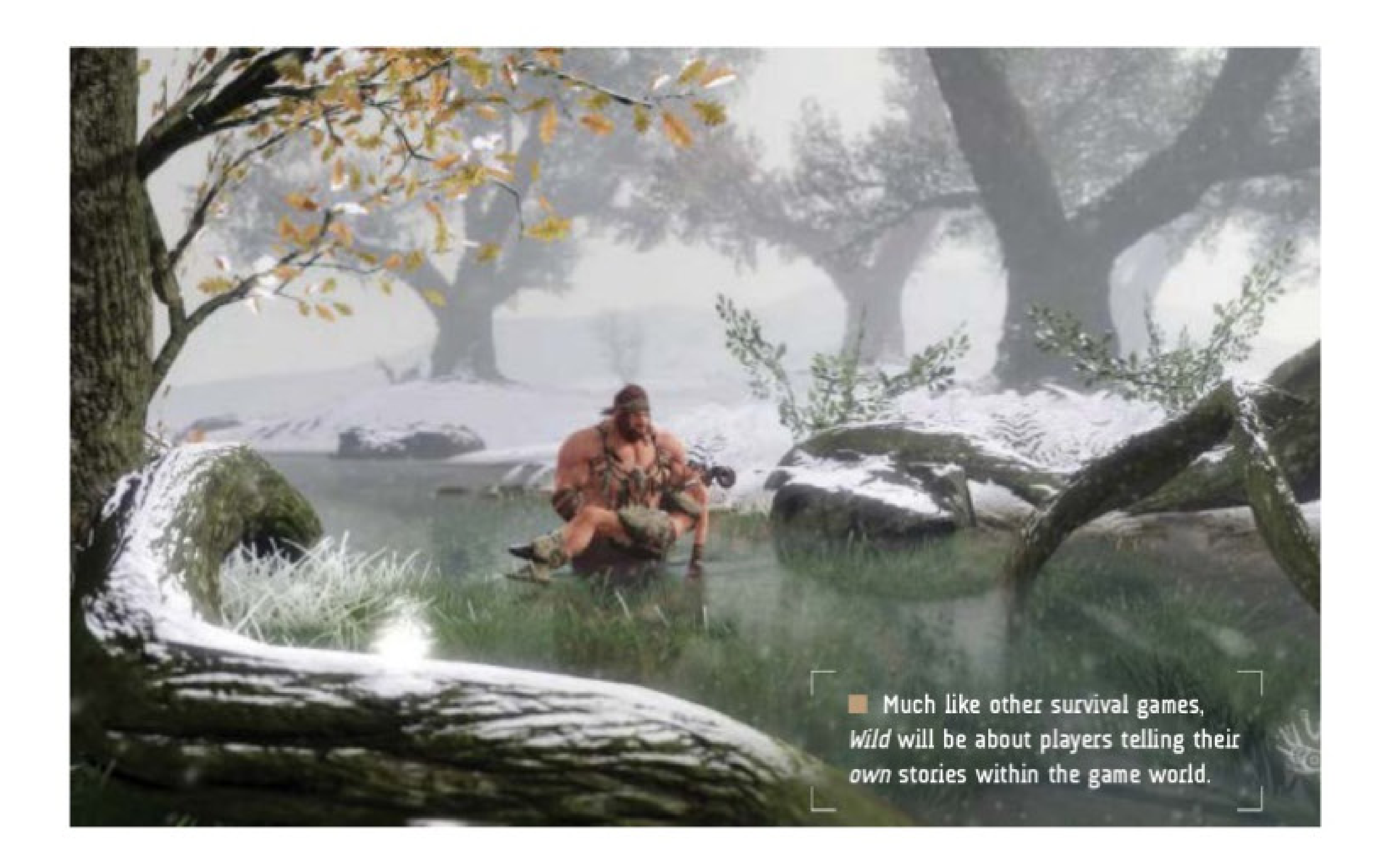
Transporting players back to a time when humanity and nature were intertwined, it's hard to tell exactly *what* is going on in *Wild*, other than a lot of animals, people and mythical creatures appear gambolling across the hilly countryside looking rather enchanted by all the whimsical goings-on.

But, much like his porcine pal in *Beyond Good & Evil*, Ancel has added a twist in the tail. Rather than playing as a human character that interacts with the world some 10,000 years ago, there's a freedom here to take on the role of any creature and explore the wilderness from their unique perspective.

There's a lot of choice in that regard and it appears this will apply not only to species consigned to the ground, but those that live in the depths beneath land and those that fly high above terra firma. Giant eagles can swoop across the mountaintops (it also appears human characters will be able to ride them), skeletal creatures reside in the depths of the sea and then there's a giant Baphomet-type creature that emerges from a hollow tree. Given that much is left to guesswork, we'd wager that players might be limited to a few standard animal types alongside humans, each of which will have specific interactions with the environment and those that live within it that will offer substantial longevity.

Which is good, considering that Ancel has stated that the core concept behind the game is to cultivate a world where players are experiencing new situations every time they play. Whether that translates to procedurally generated landscapes or a massive multiplayer environment is a subject of much debate, but it's clear that the aim here is to build a living, breathing universe that players will want to feel part of.

At this time there's only a sliver of a concept bolstered by some very impressive visuals but there's not a huge amount to chew on outside of that. We'll be waiting to see how *Wild* functions of a gameplay level to see whether its mechanics can live up to what is looking like, by all accounts, Ancel's most ambitious game to date.



Much like other survival games, *Wild* will be about players telling their *own* stories within the game world.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 4
Origin: France
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Wild Sheep Studio
Release: TBA 2015
Genre: Adventure
Players: 1-TBA

Developer Profile

Michel Ancel has been a veteran of the industry for over 20 years but found fame when he created *Rayman*. Alongside his most renowned creation, he's worked on *Beyond Good & Evil* and the *King Kong* movie tie-in. Still a part of Ubisoft's Montpellier team, he's recently launched Wild Sheep Studio to pursue non-Ubisoft based projects.

Developer History

Rayman Legends **2013 [Multi]**
Peter Jackson's King Kong **2005 [Multi]**
Beyond Good & Evil **2003 [Multi]**
Rayman **1995 [Multi]**

High Point

A split tie between *Rayman Origins* and *Legends*, which reintroduced the aging mascot in a striking new art style and rejuvenated the ailing 2D platformer.



"Along their journey they will be faced with a series of decisions that will alter both the world and their character thus dramatically impacting the storyline"

PRESS RELEASE

Lords Of The Fallen

It's not just us, right? The *Dark Souls* influence is clear for all to see, even in the screens. But if you can't wait for *Bloodborne*, *Lords Of The Fallen* is for you.

CONCEPT A buff, angry ex-con and his master set out on a journey to liberate the world from the vengeful bonds of an angry God.

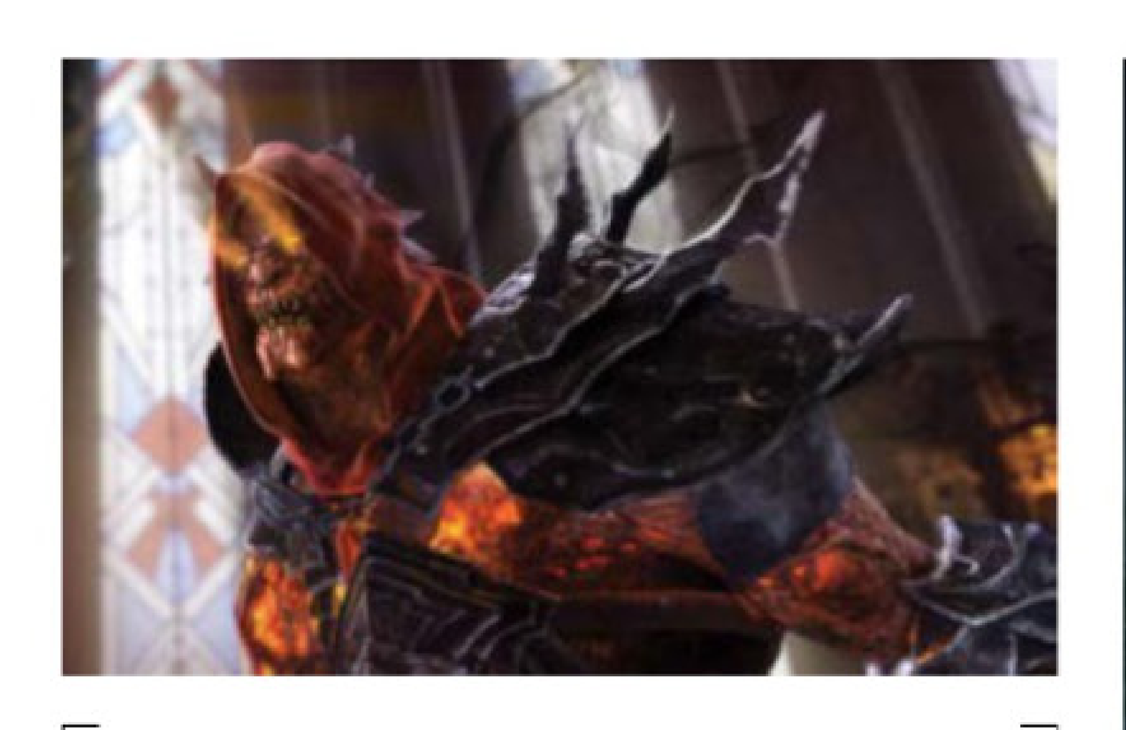
Will Deck13 bring a new dimension to the fantasy RPG?

After the gaming world fell upon its knees and started fervently praising the sun in the wake of *Dark Souls*' explosion of popularity, we wondered how long it would take before other developers took a punt at making games as sadistic and hardcore as From Software's killer IP. Not long, it turns out – *Lords Of The Fallen* takes its cues unapologetically from the king of action-RPGs, and isn't afraid to let you know that.

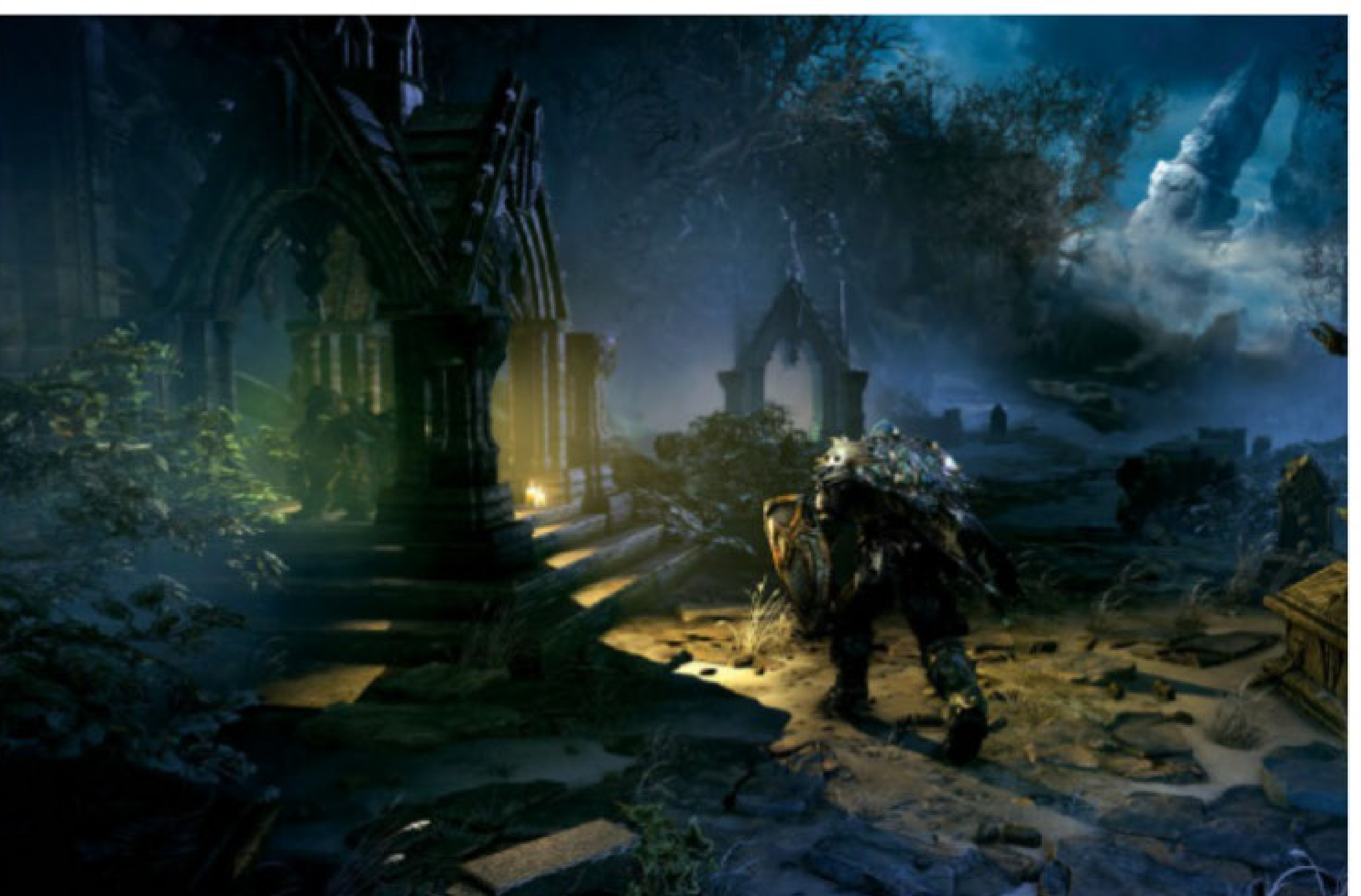
Considering the game is releasing on the PS4 and Xbox One (as well as PC), it could be the first action-RPG gamers get their hands on, releasing before *Bloodborne*. Producer Tomasz Gop promises the game will include all the best bits of the RPGs you know and love – from the action-centric domain of the *Souls* franchise to the strategy-focused realms of more traditional RPGs. Gop has even claimed the likes of *Tekken* and *Street Fighter* will be evident once you get to grips with how the game plays. Deck13 is certainly promising a lot with this, but whether it'll all come together as smoothly as the studio hopes is yet to be seen.

One way the game aims to get its head above the rest of the pack is by loading it to the brim with different enemy types, each with their own unique attack patterns and weaknesses. To come out on top, you'll have to play it slow – observe, attack and react, never being too ambitious, never gambling too much. The From Software influence is plain for all to see, although since there's no planned sequel, we wonder If we're likely to see Deck13 push the boat out in terms of on-disc content in order to achieve its vision in making a game that takes the *Souls* formula and applies it to a game that's a little more open to the average player. The main campaign is approximately 15 hours long, but Gop promises almost infinite content when it comes to the post-game. Optional loot, New Game+, liberal scatterings of secrets and player-directed exploration will bolster the campaign's conservative playtime. Gop's ambition is for players to feel notably different by the end of the game to how they did at the start – it sounds like a title that's going to punish you and challenge you, and if you don't get broken by it in the first few hours, it expects you to grow and to learn its tricks. By the end, Gop wants you to feel like a badass.

From what we've seen of the title so far, we're yet to be floored by anything in particular, but the passion and high hopes of the team behind it admittedly fills us with confidence, too.



Above: *Lords Of The Fallen*'s narrative revolves around the hero Harkyn, questing to end the perpetual battle between the Fallen God and the heretics.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PS4, PC
Origin: Germany/Poland
Publisher: Bandai Namco
Developer: Deck13/CI Games
Release: October 31, 2014
Genre: Hack-n-slash
Players: 1

Producer Profile

The bulk of development on *Lords Of The Fallen* is being carried out by Deck13, who are collaborating with Polish studio CI Games to ensure the game hits its release window.

Producer History

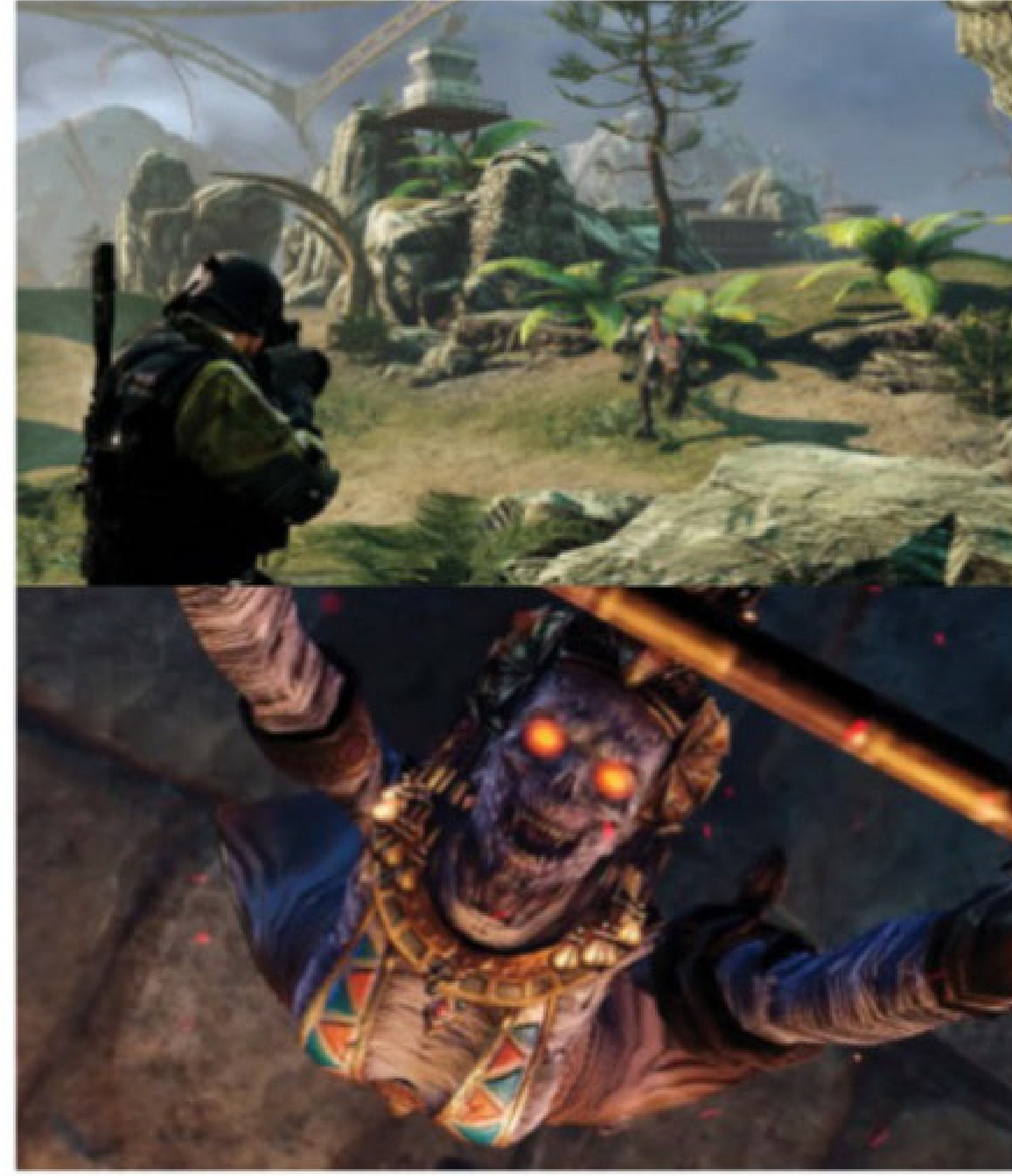
Blood Knights **2014 [Xbox 360]**
Jack Keane **2007 [PC]**
Stealth Combat **2001 [PC]**
Ankh: The Tales of Mystery **1997 [PC]**

High Point

Venetica took three years to release in English and saw substantial success – going gold on the PC. It was pulled off with passion and respect for the genre.

Right: The level and enemy variety in *Hazard Ops* is admirable: even the standard angry soldiers can't detract from how fun it is to shoot at things you can't shoot at in other games.





INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One
Origin: Germany
Publisher: Infernum
Developer: Infernum/Yingpei Games
Release: 2014
Genre: Third-person shooter
Players: 1-8

Developer Profile

Infernum is a small German company created by a team of gaming professionals – people who cut their teeth playing the same games as us, but who want to apply that experience to expanding and legitimising the free-to-play market. The company claims it's devoted to customer service and delivering first-class entertainment, and its roster of games so far shows its on the right path to achieving those goals.

Developer History

Dragon's Prophet
PC [2013]
Brick-Force
Browser [2013]

High Point

Dragon's Prophet was developed by Taiwanese developer Runewaker Entertainment, but published by Infernum. The game was fairly forgettable, except for the ability to tame and ride a wide selection of dragons…

Hazard Ops

CONCEPT From part of the Epic team that made *Gears Of War* comes *Hazard Ops* – a game that sees the undead face off against a worldwide coalition of rebels.

Brimming with potential

Imagine *Gears Of War*'s now infamous Horde Mode, and stand that beside the *more* infamous *Call Of Duty*'s Zombie Mode. Now take them both, mix them together, and thrown in a heady dose of *Halo*'s Firefight mode. That is the basis of *Hazard Ops*, a game that looks like *Gears*, plays like *Call of Duty* and ends up thinking like *Halo*.

The narrative setup is nothing ground-breaking: a global conglomeration called the IMSA is attempting to monopolise global security while a resistance faction, the ICF, pulls against the inevitable tide of globalisation. In the wake of all the human in-fighting, supernatural horrors emerge from various landmarks (we're not sure why), determined to kill all humans because they're presumably annoyed at being dead.

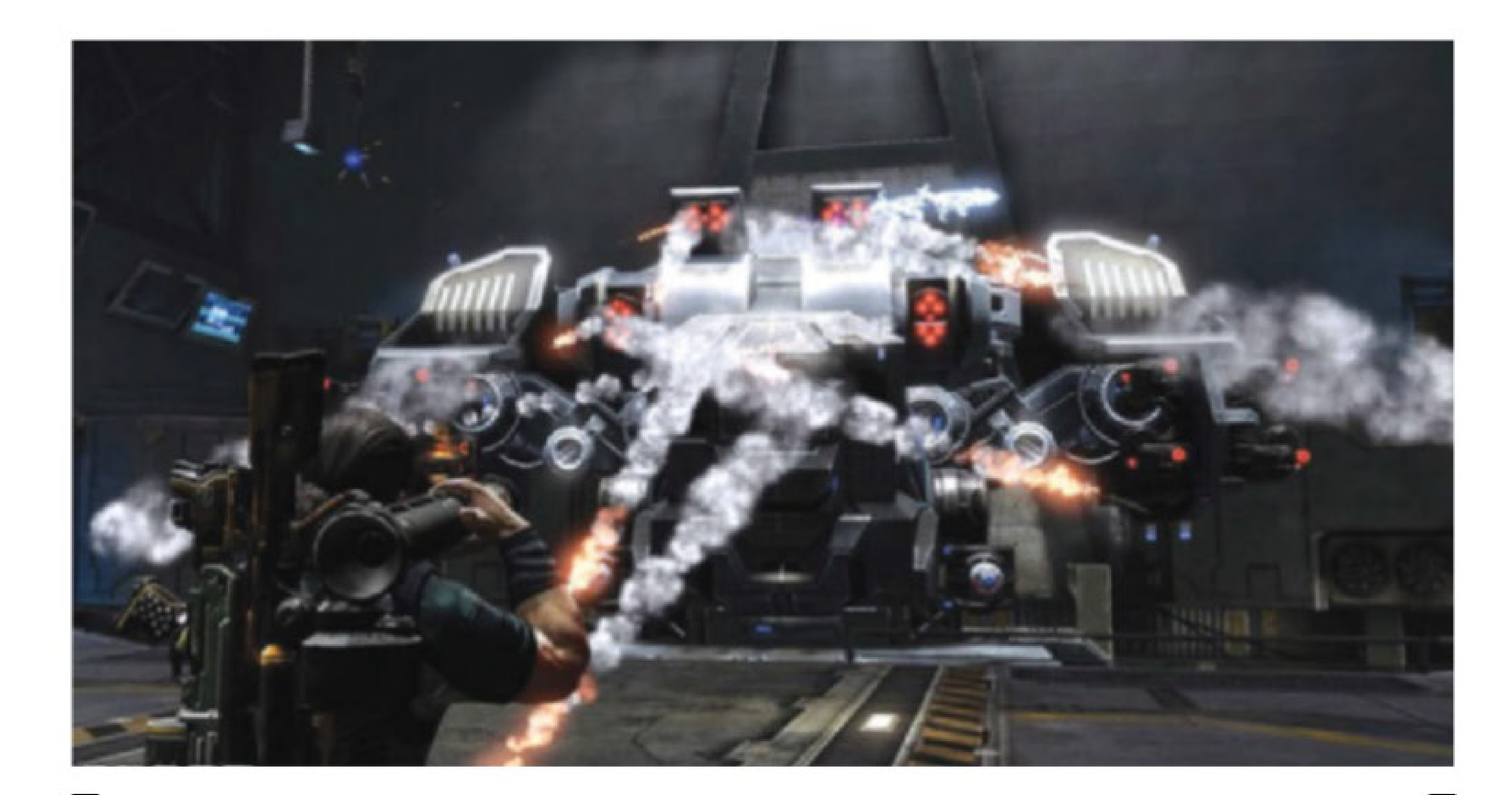
> "Hazard Ops is a cocktail of shooting flavours, mixed into one hell of a what-the-f*** experience"
> YINGPEI GAMES

The main type of gameplay to expect from *Hazard Ops* is a campaign-like corridor shooter through a slew of different levels, each inhabited by deadly local fauna that'll do their best to rip your brains out. We found the loose narrative unimportant when we were playing; mainly because it's all about shooting your way through hordes of the undead.

In our hands-on with the closed beta of the game (which has since gone open beta), we fought through an Egyptian-inspired level full of screaming pharaohs and crumbling mummies, a locked courtyard besieged by a zombie menace and a Shanghai temple brimming with angry demon souls. Each environment looked the part, and the variety of level design on offer was reassuring: multiplayer maps felt like those in *Gears 2*, while the no-frills A-to-B campaign maps were sparse if not functional.

Anyone au fait with the *Gears Of War* games will instantly recognise the heavy handling of the playable characters, the active reload system, the executions available on downed opponents and the way you glue to cover. It's remarkable how similar the game feels – but when you consider it was all put together by Yingpei Games (previously Epic China), it's easy to understand why there are so many similarities between the releases.

While *Hazard Ops* doesn't have the polish of *Gears*, it does have the 'fun factor' you'll find in Epic's seminal third-person shooter. The free-to-play elements of *Hazard Ops* are never shoved in your face, nor are they game-breaking and unbalanced – *Hazard Ops* is basically what you'd see if *Gears* went free-to-play and dropped the story in favour of co-op maps, and we know that won't be to everyone's taste. There's a drought in third-person cover-based shooters at the minute, and *Hazard Ops* is bound to satisfy some PC gamer's cravings for at least a little while.



Above: The bosses in the game will provide a challenge that's more than just chipping down a huge health bar until there's a big explosion – sometimes you'll have to hide behind things too.

> "Building an alternate London was the foundation we had to start with when making this game"
>
> RU WEERASURIYA READY AT DAWN

The Order: 1886

CONCEPT ■ The streets of London are plagued by a strange new breed of monster, and it's up to the mysterious Arthurian-inspired Order to put things right

A Victorian Werewolf In London

The Order: 1886 has been a recurring presence on these pages for the last few months, and every time it crops up, we mention how good it looks. In the wake of the ongoing resolution/framerate war being fought in the trenches between Xbox One and PS4 adopters, it seems odd the often-higher fps PS4 has an exclusive that sits happily on a 30 frames-per-second rate… but it actually does the game a lot of favours.

It's clear Ready At Dawn has gone for the more cinematic flavour with the game's visuals, and running at 30fps just adds to that grainy, cinematographic feel. We have no doubt critics will rally to champion one of the best-looking games we've seen on current tech on the games release – and that praise goes further than just good graphics. The soft effects that frame the screen helps, and the intricately layered textures that mesh together to form the varied environments all knit seamlessly, making the entire experience feel much more like a sojourn through a nostalgic film scene than a standard action game.

But as far as gameplay goes, that's all we've seen of *The Order: 1886* so far – it's a third-person cover-based shooter that does little to push the mechanics we've seen in *Gears Of War* and similar games any further. It plays slower than its Xbox 360 predecessor, too – the main characacter, Galahad, feels a lot weightier than he looks – and gluing to cover happens almost magnetically. While there's a lot of inventive weaponry in the game – justified by the eldritch Blackwater substance the narrative comes to focus upon – none of it feels particularly fresh: we've seen it all before, in some game or another, and the glowing machinations equipped by the knights of *The Order* feel like steampunk re-skins of (you guessed it) *Gears Of War* weapons.

It's clear there's a lot of Cliff Bleszinski's action epic in *The Order*'s DNA, but where *Gears* succeeded, we're concerned *The Order* may come unstuck. *Gears* pulled off the crunchy combat and overblown narrative because the two elements were balanced so well, but *The Order* rests heavily on its narrative footing. From what we've seen, the story seems to be good, but if the gameplay turns out to be hackneyed and uninspired as we fear it might be, we wonder how far the story will carry the game before it all collapses under its own bulk.

Don't get us wrong, we're excited about *The Order: 1886* – it looks like it could be the best looking thing on the PS4, and keep that crown for quite some time – but we're concerned that as an all-round gaming experience, it's going to leave some players feeling underwhelmed. Still – this looks like a cinephile's dream game through and through, so if you were enamoured with the likes of *Beyond: Two Souls* and *Heavy Rain*, you'll probably love *The Order: 1886* too.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: USA
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer: Ready At Dawn
Release: 20 February 2015
Genre: Action-adventure
Players: 1

Developer Profile

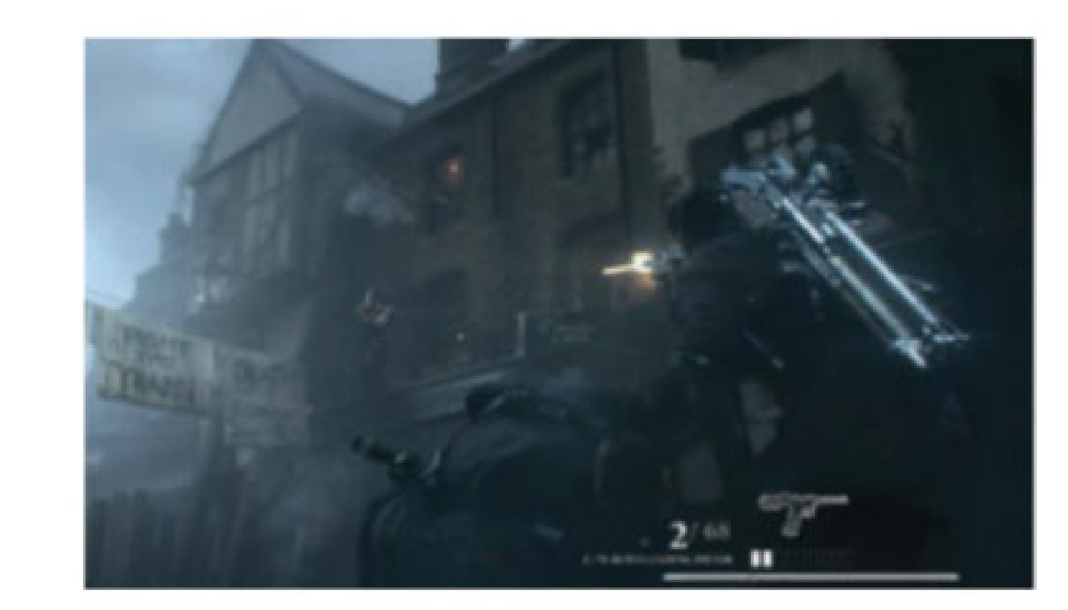
Most well-known for its work on porting pre-existing games to handheld consoles (and porting *Okami* to the Wii), Ready At Dawn proved itself as a viable studio with its own take on *God Of War*, leading it to work on the PS3 on the *God Of War: Origins* collection. How the studio handles its own property remains to be seen, however.

Developer History

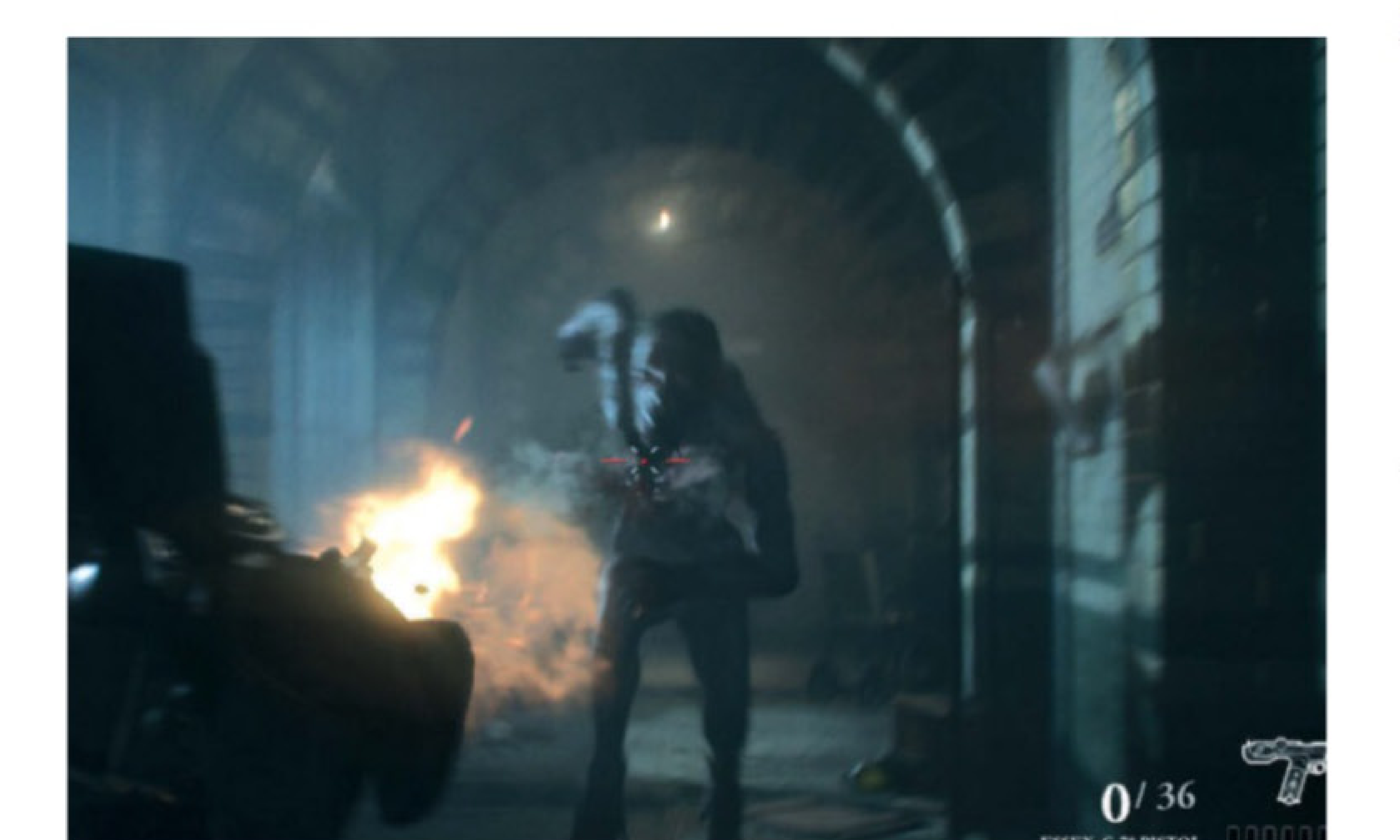
God Of War: Origins Collection **2011 [PS3]**
Okami [Port] **2008 [Wii]**
Daxter **2006 [PSP]**

High Point

God of War: Ghost Of Sparta took full advantage of the PSP's small and mighty design, legitimising the console and staving off its inevitable death in the West just a little longer.



■ Above: Enemies come in a variety of supernatural flavours, so expect to be blasting your way through some werewolves and vampires and who knows what other gothic horrors.

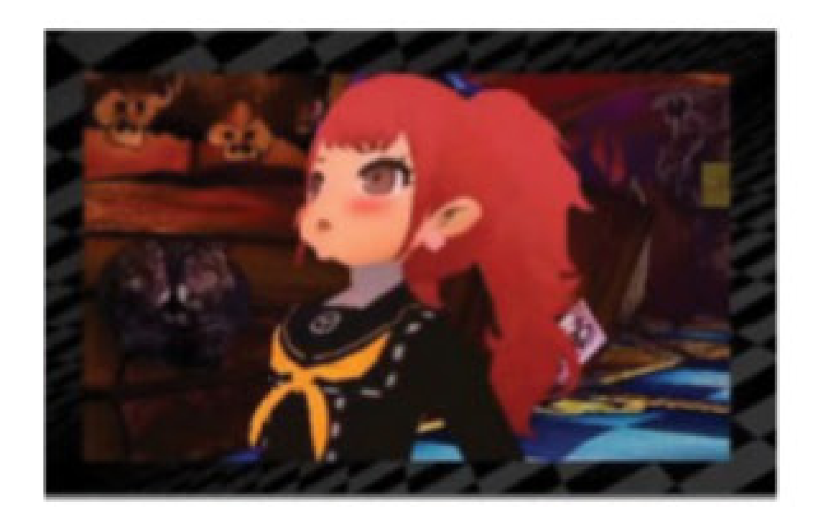


SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

PERSONA Q

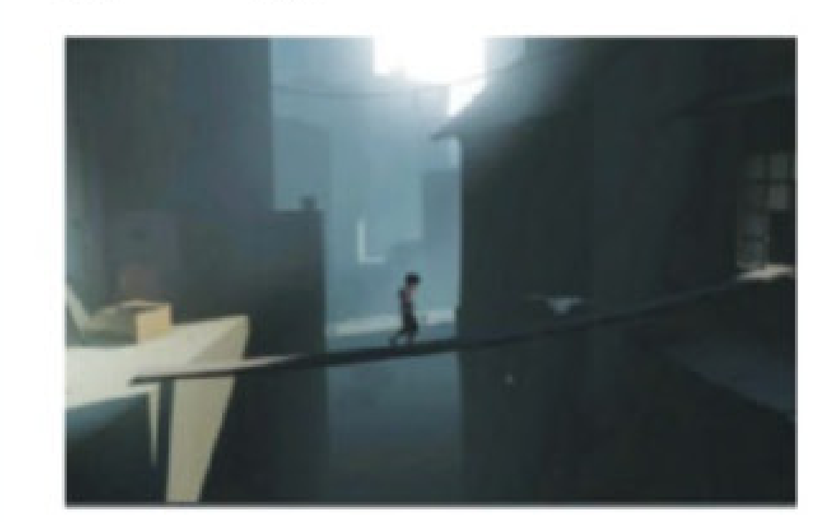
Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Atlus**
Developer: **Atlus**
ETA: **2014**



COMBINING CHARACTERS from *Persona 3* and *Persona 4*, *Q* is basically going to be the *Etrian Odyssey* of the *Shin Megami Tensei* subset – a dungeon-crawler to its core. It has an interesting conceit, though, in that there are effectively two sides of the story you can focus on, depending on if you choose to follow the protagonists of *Persona 3* or *Persona 4*. Expect it to be brimming with fan service.

INSIDE

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Playdead**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



AFTER THE runaway success of *Limbo*, Playdead received funding from the Danish Film Institute to help the studio continue making games with its trademark aesthetic. *Inside* will be a spiritual sequel to *Limbo*, a puzzle-platformer retaining the same grim, foreboding atmosphere, though making use of 2.5D graphics rather than the flat planes of *Limbo*. If you're expecting a colourful experience, *Inside* may not be for you…

THE WITNESS

Format: **PS4, iOS, PC**
Publisher: **Thelka, Inc**
Developer: **In-House**
ETA: **Winter 2014**



BRAID'S JONATHAN Blow started working on *The Witness* just after his seminal first game gained fame. It moves away from his 2D platforming foundations and explores the connection between 3D perception and puzzle solving, dropping the player onto an open-world island and tasking them with finding their own way through a variety of left-field challenges. Think *Shutter Island: The Game*, but more intelligently put together.

FINAL FANTASY TYPE-0 HD

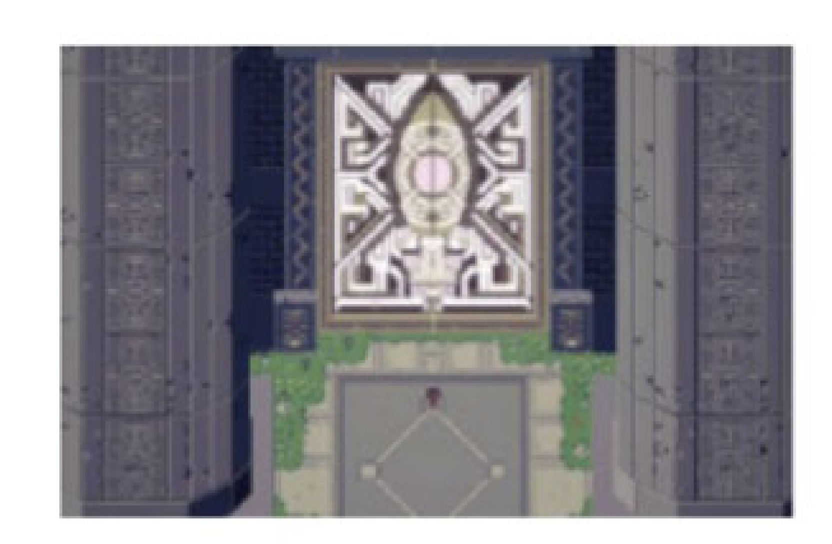
Format: **PS3**
Publisher: **Square Enix**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



IT MAY have been six years since the game was released in Japan, but the West is finally getting to see *Type-0* – and in HD, to boot. We feel it would have made more sense to release the game as a Vita port, but we can't complain – the Xbox One and the PS4 will likely make the combat feel even crunchier than it did on handheld, and if the audio gets a remaster, too, it could be the best console *Final Fantasy* for some time.

TITAN SOULS

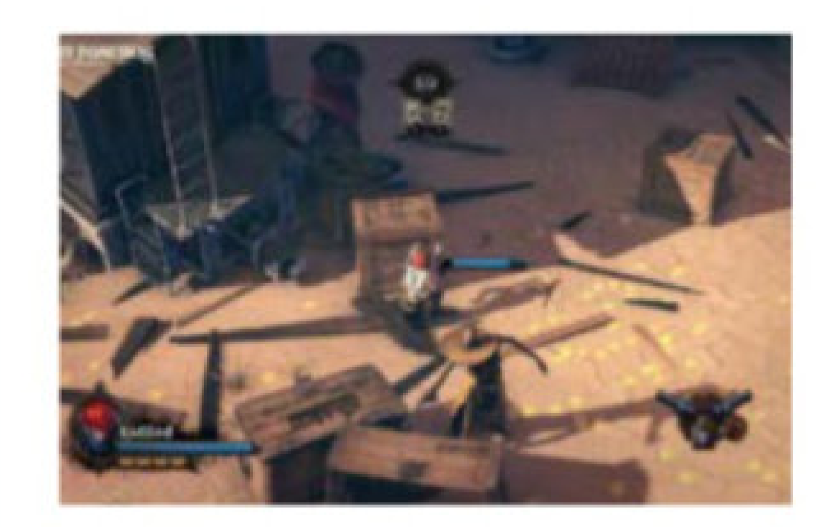
Format: **Vita, PS4**
Publisher: **Devolver Digital**
Developer: **Acidnerve**
ETA: **2015**



BORN FROM a Ludum Dare game jam, *Titan Souls* was built around the idea of 'you only get one.' It evolved from its primordial jam state and has evolved, the 'one thing' became an arrow you can fire and retrieve. It has the potential to create some interesting puzzles, and taking its cues from *Dark Souls* in terms of difficulty, you can expect *Titan Souls* to have you tapping your Vita in pleasant frustration.

SECRET PONCHOS

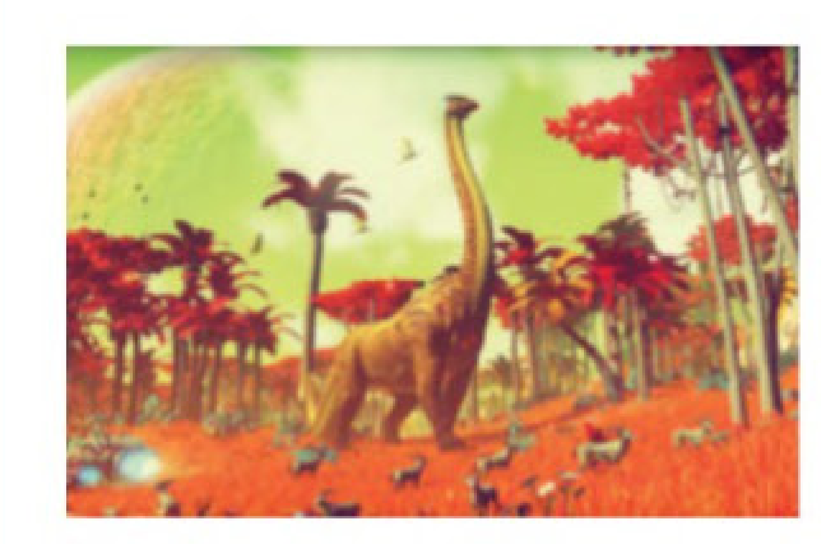
Format: **PS4**
Publisher: **Switchblade Monkeys**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2014**



SECRET PONCHOS is like *Team Fortress*, in a spaghetti-Western setting with elements of *Homefront*'s multiplayer. As a violent outlaw, you'll have a bounty on your head that climbs with every kill: take out a few people and you'll have vengeful teammates coming after you, thirsty for the bonus points hovering over your head. But if they take your bounty, aren't they going to have a bigger one placed on them?

NO MAN'S SKY

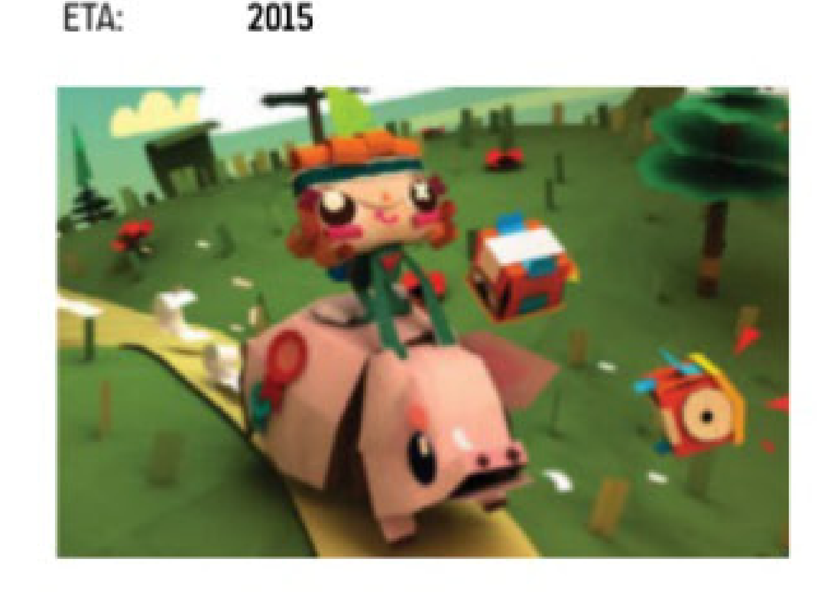
Format: **PS4**
Publisher: **Hello Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



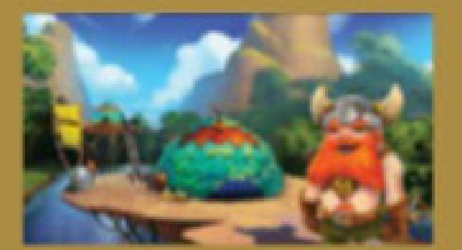
A PROCEDURALLY-generated game that promises no two players will ever have the same experience sounds too good to be true, but it looks like Hello Games is well under way with its ground-breaking exploration sim. The game promises space-based combat, deep-sea exploration, planet-specific ecosystems and so much variation that it almost seems impossible to condense into one of these little boxes.

TEARAWAY

Format: **PS4**
Publisher: **Sony Computer Entertainment**
Developer: **Media Molecule**
ETA: **2015**



THE VITA platformer that took the handheld by storm is releasing on the PS4 next year. At first we were dubious about the way the port would work – after all, part of the game's charm was its unique use of the Vita's back touch screen and gyroscopic capabilities. But with the DualShock 4 and its touchpad, we can imagine the PS4 version of *Tearaway* being as utterly addictive as the Vita version.



CANCELLED – Yogventures! (Multi)

After being funded via Kickstarter, Yogscast announced that its game would not see a release, and development on the title has been terminated. This resulted in the loss of roughly $500,000 – money that hasn't been accounted for. Uh-oh.



DELAYED – Evolved (Multi)

It's a damn shame, but the four-on-one co-op shooter has been pushed back from October 2014 to February 2015. At least this means the game won't get swallowed in an already over-subscribed Q4 this year, though.

BLAZBLUE: CLONE PHANTASMA

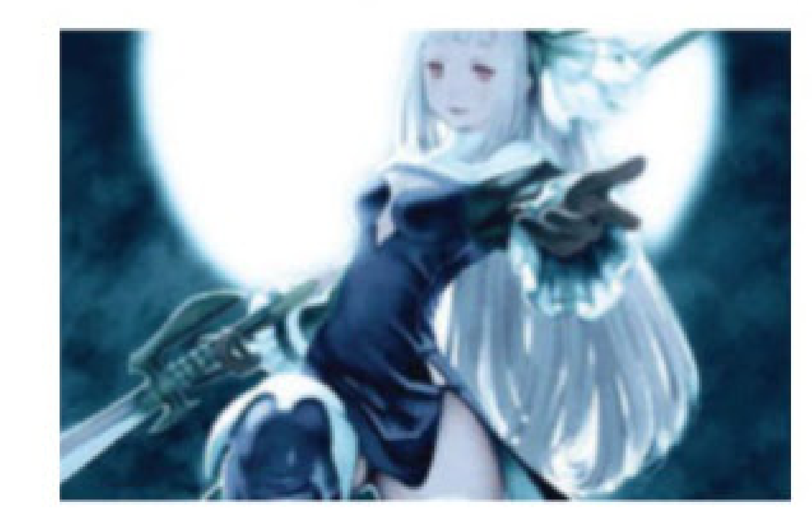
Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Arc System Works**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



RELEASED ON Japanese shores all the way back in 2012, Arc System Works has been fairly quiet about the likelihood of a Western release, but not too long ago, the studio did clarify that we'll definitely see the 3DS chibi brawler release within the next year or so. It's a 3D arena fighter in the vein of *Super Smash Bros*, but with all the off-the-wall, mythology infused madness *BlazBlue* is so well known for.

BRAVELY SECOND

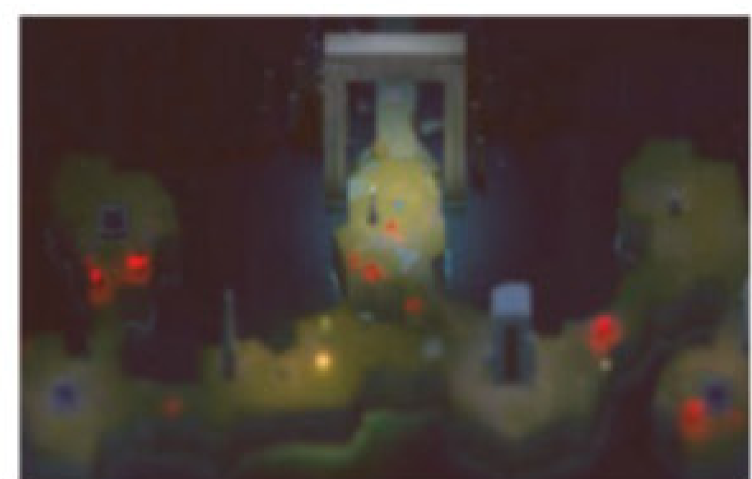
Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Square Enix**
Developer: **Silicon Studio**
ETA: **2015 (Japan)**



BRAVELY DEFAULT recently hit the one million sales mark, with most sales actually coming from outside Japan. In light of that, we're convinced we'll be seeing the in-development *Bravely Second* launch in the West shortly after its Japanese release. It's basically old-school *Final Fantasy*, with a narrative focus instead of an exploratory one – something we know a lot of disenfranchised RPG fans will be happy to play.

BELOW

Format: **Xbox One**
Publisher: **Microsoft Games Studios**
Developer: **Capybara Games**
ETA: **2014**



A NON-VERBAL trek through a dark fantasy world full of peril and death – sounds like a perfect release for an Xbox Live Arcade that's seen a scant release of platformers lately. Developed by the team that brought us *Sword & Sorcery*, expect high production values, attention to detail and stunning pixel-art throughout *Below*, along with responsive mechanics that will make navigating its murky dungeons hellishly fun.

PILLARS OF ETERNITY

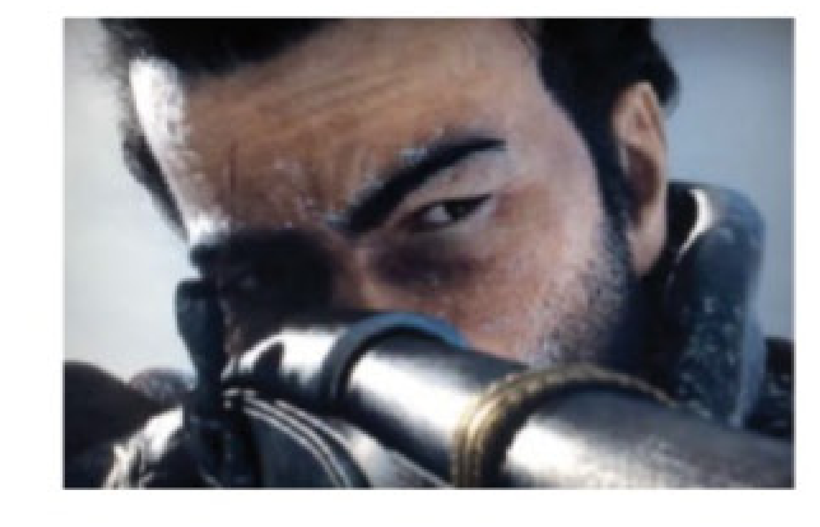
Format: **PC, Mac, iOS**
Publisher: **Paradox Interactive**
Developer: **Obsidian Entertainment**
ETA: **Q4 2014**



PILLARS OF Eternity is basically *Baldur's Gate 3* – Obsidian Entertainment's spiritual successor to the famous action-RPG series. *Pillars Of Eternity* will have its own unique world and storyline, but the way it plays will be reminiscent of the classic RPGs that launched Obsidian to fame. It's an isometric RPG in which you can have a team of six explore a lush fantasy world – what's not to be excited about?

ASSASSIN'S CREED: ROGUE

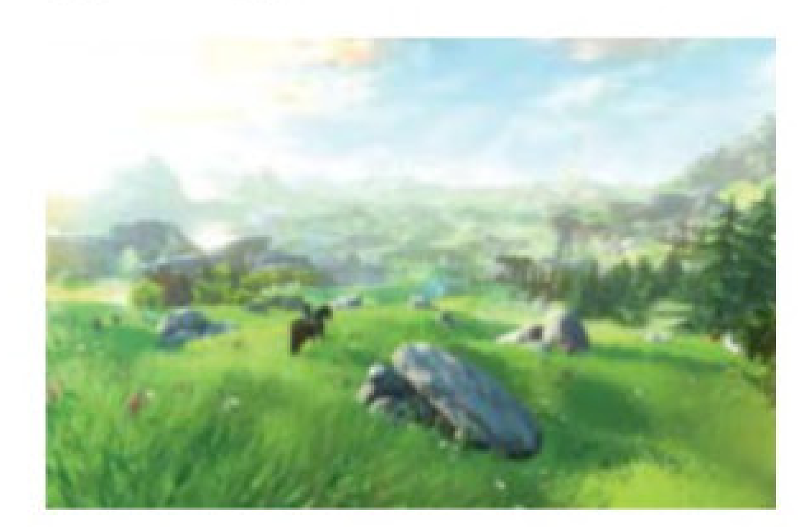
Format: **PS3, Xbox 360**
Publisher: **Ubisoft**
Developer: **Ubisoft Sofia**
ETA: **11 November 2014**



AS PART of Ubisoft's initiative to publish two *Assassin's Creed* games a year, *Rogue* will revolve around the story of an assassin-turned-Templar that'll only be released on last-gen consoles. The game will pick up where *Black Flag* left off, featuring cameos from familiar characters and revolving largely around ship-based combat, land navigation and third-person Eagle-diving…

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

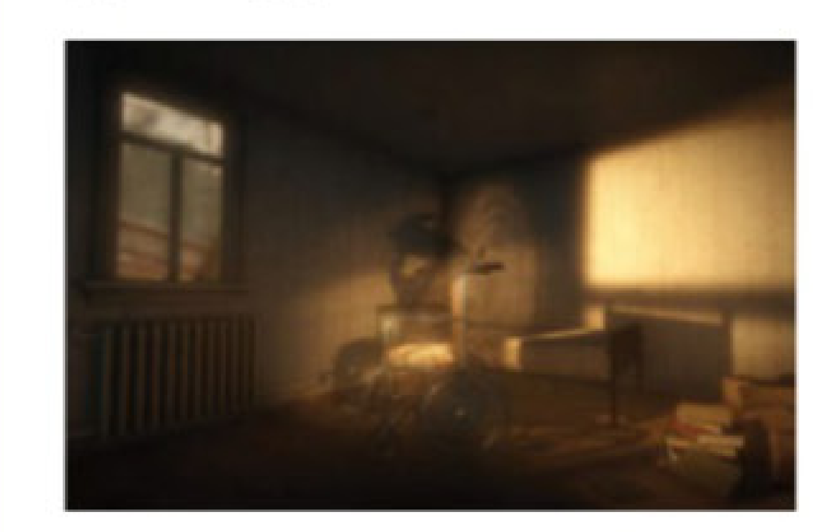
Format: **Wii U**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



WE'VE BEEN calling this game 'The Zelda Scrolls' in the office, because it looks set to take all the best open-world aspects of Bethesda's generation-defining RPG and apply them to a *Zelda* template. So far, we've only seen a scant few shots of game action, but it looks stunning: offering players graphics and freedom never achieved in a *Zelda* game before. If the Wii U needed a killer app, this may be it.

EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE

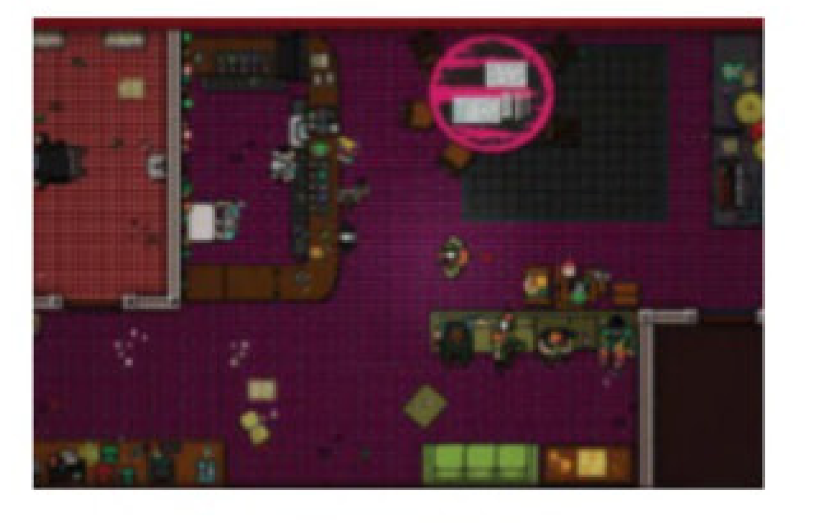
Format: **PS4**
Publisher: **Sony Computer Entertainment**
Developer: **The Chinese Room**
ETA: **2015**



CUTTING ITS teeth on *Half-Life*-mod *Dear Esther*, The Chinese Room established a name for itself as a master of languid narrative and ambience. The upcoming *Rapture* is set in a deserted countryside town somewhere in the middle of England, and has all the understated creepiness you'd expect from that setting… especially as the game takes place on the eve of an apocalypse.

HOTLINE MIAMI 2: WRONG NUMBER

Format: **PS4, Vita, PC**
Publisher: **Devolver Digital**
Developer: **Dennaton Games**
ETA: **2015**



THE MOST exciting thing about *Hotline Miami 2* is that it'll come with a Level Editor. The option to take the dingy basements, thumping dance floors and, erm, hospital suites of the first game and craft them into near-impossible levels of our own is a riveting prospect. The first hurt our thumbs, but the sequel will hurt our brains as we try to wrangle new, hellish levels to dump on our friends.


THE NEW DAWN OF
DRAGON AGE

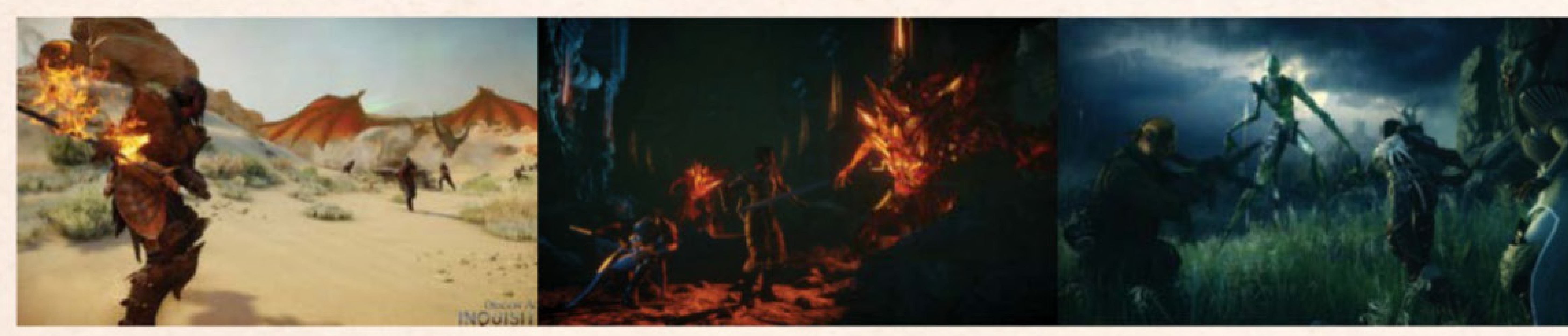


Dragon Age: Inquisition promises to raise the stakes and provide something more expansive than BioWare has ever before achieved

The Dragon Age series has not had the easiest of flights over its five-year history. 2009's *Dragon Age: Origins* might have been near universally praised in its PC guise for providing a rich story, fulfilling combat and narrative interactions that matter, but its console counterpart was torn apart by many. At its heart, *Origins* is designed to be played with a mouse and keyboard, and transplanting that focus to a control pad forced the removal of much of what made it so engaging.

In an attempt to fix the problem, *Dragon Age 2* opted for a greater focus on action-based combat – removing any need or ability to think tactically and plan ahead. Predictably, this caused a polarisation of opinion. Fans of *Origins*, particularly those playing on PC, felt betrayed and forgotten by BioWare, attacking the studio for simplifying the game's systems in order to appeal to a wider, more mainstream, console-focused audience. On the other side of the coin, action fans were taken with the approach, and praised the combat for being more satisfying and instinctual.

The most damning piece of criticism that has befallen both *Dragon Age* games is regarding a supposed lack of personality. Rather than trying to define a new slice of fantasy RPG territory for itself, »



The larger world has resulted in more diversity of region types. We've seen desert, nightmarish bogs, mountainous outcrops and, of course, urban centres.



Shadow Realms

Letting the player dictate the conflict…

Not due out until the end of 2015, BioWare's *Shadow Realms* is also looking to expand and diversify the studio's approach to narrative and experiment with how it intersects with player interaction. The game will be released episodically, with story segments ending on cliff-hanger moments that lead into conflicts designed to kept you occupied until the next episode.

This combat is designed around an asymmetrical, four-versus-one system in which a team of heroes attempt to best a single 'Shadow Lord'. While the Shadow Lord is invisible and can't be harmed, it can be beaten if you reach the end of a level and kill the 'boss' waiting there. It's in the placement of traps, the manipulation of minions and the act of second-guessing your foes that the narrative flow of these conflicts are crafted.

the series is often thought of as one that treads the same ground we've seen before – albeit one that adds BioWare's trademark quality of writing to its familiar genre customs. Some have even said that *Dragon Age* is simply a reincarnation of *Baldur's Gate*, the classic and revered BioWare RPG of the late Nineties.

While there is little wrong with trying to imitate the tone and core characteristics of such a well-respected series, imitation of any kind doesn't lend itself to the sensation that you're playing something evolutionary, original or innovative. Compared to the studio's *Mass Effect* series, for instance, *Dragon Age* up to this point has felt staunchly conventional.

Mass Effect sees you play through a whole trilogy as the same character, giving you the opportunity to see how the entire universe can change thanks to the decisions made by a single person: you. This seamless connection between games – and the complexity of the systems governing character relationships throughout – imprints a genuine sense of modernity on the series. By contrast, *Dragon Age* puts you in control of a different character in each game, and will do so again for *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

The risk here is that players will fail to see a link between their actions across games: that each entry into the series is designed as an isolated, rather than a related, experience; that your character is a window onto the world, rather than a genuine participant in it. *Inquisition* producer Cameron Lee, however, explains that new protagonists are necessary for each game to portray the scale of the story that has been written for the series as a whole.

"Unlike something like *Mass Effect*, which is the story of Shepard, what we're doing with *Dragon Age* is telling the story of the world," explains Lee. "That story doesn't need to be told through the eyes of a single character. In fact, the story requires that you experience different characters for us to tell it properly.

"This is a genuinely huge narrative, and the events taking place within it are enormous, so we're telling it across different characters, different events and across a much longer timescale… it's been about ten years from the events of *Origins* to the start of *Inquisition*. We need lots of different characters to provide that wider perspective."

As has been evidenced in countless games up to this point: the bigger and more open the world, the more difficult it becomes to communicate a strong and alluring tale to the player. The problem revolves around trying to balance the sense of freedom with the provision of a plot that demands you connect with, and spend time undertaking, specific acts.

Succinctly, it comes down to providing a semblance of authorship from both player and writer. Players want to experience their own story, but they like being told stories, too. This is where something like *Mass Effect* succeeds. As Shepard, you author your own detailed actions and relationships, but in the wider story, your position in it and the connections between the series' various races are all but determined for you.

> "Dragon Age puts you in control of a different character in each game, and will do so again for Dragon Age: Inquisition"

Conversation options are promised to be more impactful this time around, with characters taking more interest and influence from all of your responses – rather than those simply aimed at them.

Depending on your chosen difficulty level, some battles will require you to use tactical view to succeed. By stopping time, it lets you give orders to your party members and have them carry them out simultaneously.

Lee, though, is confident that BioWare has all the relevant experience and expertise to be able to tell an enticing story.

"When you're trying to make an incredibly huge, open and breathing world to explore, and still tell an incredibly story within that world... you're right; most game can't – and haven't – done it," says Lee when the aforementioned balancing problem is put to him. "I can't think of one [game] that has genuinely succeeded in achieving that high level of storytelling in a wide-open world.

"But... we're BioWare. Storytelling is what we do. Characters are what we do. The way that we have been able to merge these two things together successfully [in *Inquisition*] is through the way we've set up the Inquisition, which is the organisation that you lead as the player." The Inquisition, and your role as Inquisitor, is key to both narrative and interaction. From your seat at the war table, you have access to a map of the world showing what Lee says is "over 300 different operations that ask you make decisions and take action." Here, you can choose to spend "power and influence" to unlock and visit new parts of the world and become involved in the story of that region.

Essentially, it's up to you to decide when, where and with who to become involved – your Inquisitor's history and character being born from these choices. One example involves you coming across a destroyed bridge while on an optional quest in a non-critical path area of the world. Here, you can choose to place an Inquisition flag on the bridge, singling it out for your agents to repair. This costs power and influence to perform, but fixing it will expand the amount of traversable land you have access to, and might affect the people of that region's view of you.





Inquisition's over-the-shoulder camera is positioned closer to the character this time around, the idea being to increase the visual impact of combat and create a more stark separation between this and the tactical view.

These regions are comparatively enormous to before. In Lee's own words, *Inquisition*'s 'Hinterlands' area alone is "bigger than all of *Dragon Age: Origins* combined. Now we've got ten of those massive areas, plus critical path stories... some of those have branching decisions, so you could see some content and not see other content."

How much and what you decide to interact with is up to you. BioWare has said that a playthrough of all of *Inquisition*'s content will take over 200 hours, with only around 20-30 hours required to complete the core story.

"It's up to the player to decide when they want to engage with the main plot threads," continues Lee, "and that allows for some really interesting dynamism between your actions, the story and the exploration. From a *Dragon Age* and a BioWare perspective it's an absolutely massive game. It's bigger than things we've made in the past.

"We want players to get involved inside this world in a way that's more detailed than simply asking players 'do you want to go on a dungeon crawl and find some loot'? That's not the kind of game we're making here. The depth of the characterisations and the personalities is all there. There's close to a million words of dialogue in this game... that's typical BioWare [laughs], that's what we do."

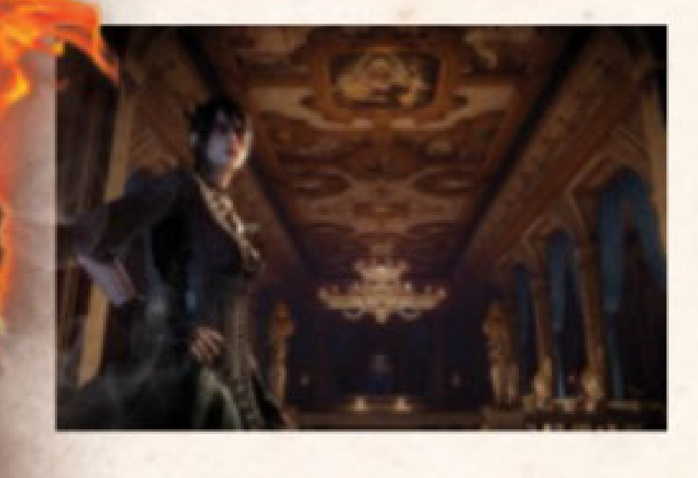
Despite the focus on a new protagonist, some familiar personalities are returning. Fan-favourite Morrigan – from *Origins* – is back, as are Cassandra and Varric from *Dragon Age 2*. Having been in both previous games, Flemeth and Cullen will make their third outings here. »

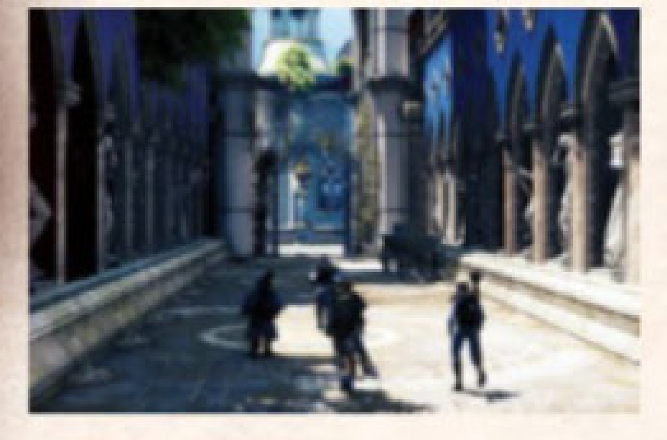
"BioWare has said that a playthrough of all of Inquisition's content will take you over 200 hours"

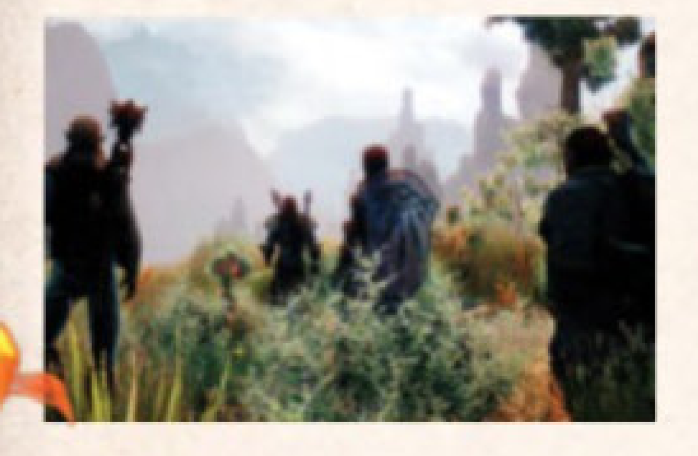
The cloud-based 'Dragon Age Keep' system will allow you to import and customise your saves from previous *Dragon Age* games, giving you the option of having important decisions you've previously made affect your world in *Inquisition*.



"Depending on the actions you take in the story and the decisions you make as Inquisitor, different characters will begin to form different relationships"







In response to criticisms of *Dragon Age 2*, the environments of *Inquisition* are more open and designed to facilitate greater exploration. As Inquisitor, it's up to you to decide which areas to visit.

» The presence of known characters should go some way to helping veteran players feel greater investment in *Inquisition*, the recognisable faces creating a consistent thread throughout the trilogy in the absence of a single lead. To what extent you can spark up meaningful relationships with them is unknown, but BioWare promises that the overall connections between characters are far greater than they have previously achieved.

Such relationships have been a key component within the majority of BioWare's epic-scale role-playing games. From *Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic* and *Mass Effect* and to past *Dragon Age* games, developing and sustaining intimate affairs with others has been a core pillar of design, providing a degree of humane warmth amid events that are often disastrous for all involved.

While welcome, there's little doubt that the mechanical process of becoming involved with another character has largely been shallow and robotic. Lavishing love interests with gifts, agreeing with their every word and repetitively inviting them to your personal quarters has been more than enough to convince most of the 'romance-able' characters of past BioWare games to fall for you.

Inquisition is taking a different approach, however; one based more around actions and choices then your skill in flattery and gift-giving. Fundamentally, the idea is to match you with others who possess traits and beliefs that fall in line with how you act throughout the game.

"[Relationships] are more fluid than in previous *Dragon Age* games, so that means there's much more involvement in how you talk and interact with your companions," Lee proclaims when I complain that past games in the series have lacked intrigue in this area. "All [characters] have their own goals, motivations and ambitions... essentially they all have their own lives that they're leading.

"The more you get involved with aspects of their life that are important to them, the more you learn about them and the more your relationship with them builds and changes over time. You can then choose whether you want to move forward in a romantic way with that character, because there's nothing that says you must be romantically involved with someone just because you've built a relationship with them.

"Depending on the actions you take in the story and the decisions you make as Inquisitor, different characters will begin to form different relationships and think about you and the world in different ways. It's very cool and interesting to see how those decisions affect the other characters and change their path through the game."

Yes, that means non-playable characters can form relationships with each other, and yes, such potential is influenced by how you act, what parts of the world you explore and which relationships you have already formed. No longer will it seem like you're the only person interested in developing intimacy with others, a step that should go a long way to helping *Inquisition*'s cast feel more rounded and three-dimensional.

Few things scream 'realism' than watching characters develop feelings for each other in the absence of direct probing and pushing. To use a buzzword, it will hopefully result in making the world feel more 'organic'.

In line with how the exploration and story is presented, this relationship system is symbolic of *Inquisition*'s goal of facilitating player freedom: freedom to do, act and react as you see fit. It's entirely possible, for instance, that a character you're fond of could strike up a relationship with one you despise. How will that change your opinion of them both? Will you see a different side to the one you previously despised? Will you now dislike the one you were keen on?

Not only do these kinds of relationships have the power to alter your view of the world; they also have the potential to question yourself and why you feel a certain way towards another person. If *Inquisition* can truly prompt this kind of soul-searching then it will represent the culmination of what BioWare has been on the verge of achieving for so many years.

Harking more overtly back to times of old is the base layer of *Inquisition*'s combat class system. As in *Dragon Age* games past, you must choose to play as either Mage, Warrior or Rogue, although 'freedom' remains the goal here. Across the three classes are split 21 different skill trees and over 250 abilities to learn, with all the usual equipment enchanting/crafting layered on top of that.

Combat itself sees the return of the tactical camera, a viewpoint that was previously exclusive to the PC version of *Origins*. It was removed entirely from *Dragon Age 2*, deemed too slow for the action-focused approach. *Inquisition*'s top-down tactical camera lets you stop time and give your party simultaneous commands in order for them to combine talents.

For example, you might want to send a Warrior charging into battle while instructing your Mage to keep her healed and healthy. Alternatively, you might want to split your team up – sending two into battle, while two flank the enemy to set up traps in case they try to retreat.

"[Combat] is more involved in terms of how you use the environment, your abilities and how the enemies react to you," Lee tells us. "You can bring up the tactical camera to look at how combat is playing out and set up some strategies, then you jump back into action mode and see it all play out, or you can allow time to flow forward from tactical view."

Allowing time to flow from within tactical view is designed to blend the action-based, over-the-shoulder perspective with the more cerebral top-down view – preventing the two options from feeling mutually exclusive and, in turn, letting them complement each other.

It's these design choices that *Inquisition* is building itself around; the idea that no part of the game should feel isolated or separate from any other. As we've discussed, the series has previously been accused of lacking cohesion and personality. Thus, if *Inquisition* can blend its parts into a unified whole, it will represent a genuine evolution in the path of not only *Dragon Age*, but also of BioWare.

As the first BioWare game to be released on the next generation of consoles, the pressure and expectation on *Inquisition* is enormous. There are few studios in the world on which players place so much trust and hope, and to let them down after so much promise would be equal parts disaster and disappointment for all concerned.

What does Lee think of this pressure? "These are the kinds of games we want to make. We love making games that are driven by story and characters; that's what we're about. So is there extra pressure given our past history? No."

DRAGON'S DEN

A COLLECTION OF THE MOST OVERDRAMATIC CASES OF BACKLASH AGAINST BIOWARE

ONE OF MY FAVOURITE GAMES OF ALL TIME! LOVED THE FIRST 99.9% OF THE GAME. THE ENDING MADE ME WANT TO MICROWAVE THE DISC AND FEED IT TO A GOAT.

■ In response to BioWare asking players what they liked about Mass Effect 3.

...WHY LIMIT SAME-SEX ROMANCES TO AN ENTIRE PLANET ANYWAY? IS IT WHERE THE GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY STORES ALL THE HOMOSEXUALS?

■ Reaction to the fact that same-sex romance would be limited to the planet Makeb in Star Wars: The Old Republic.

THE COMBAT SYSTEM HAS NO TACTICS AND IS BUILT JUST TO APPEAL TO FANS OF TEKKEN OR FABLE, WHERE BUTTON-MASHING IS A MUST.

■ User review of Dragon Age 2.

POOR WRITING AND POOR DECISION-MAKING ALL AROUND DERAIL THE GRAND FINALE OF THIS SERIES. THE MAIN PLOT DEVELOPMENTS ARE INSIPID AND THE CHARACTER WRITING – NORMALLY A SAVING GRACE IN EVEN SUBPAR BIOWARE GAMES – SEEMS ANAEMIC.

■ Mass Effect fan disappointed by the third game in the trilogy.

THIS WAS BY FAR THE WORST GAME I HAVE PLAYED ON PS3 TO DATE. THE GRAPHICS WAS [SIC] HORRIBLE, THIS GAME IS PS2 QUALITY.

■ User review of Dragon Age: Origins, PS3.

YOU'LL SEE FULL-FRONTAL NUDITY AND THE ABILITY FOR PLAYERS TO ENGAGE IN GRAPHIC SEX.

■ FOX News inaccurately attacks Mass Effect. The station was later forced to apologise for its misrepresentation of a game it admitted no one on the team had ever played.



SPACE ODDITY

Creative Assembly is best known for its strategy games, so what inspired a studio so well-versed in one genre to reach out of its comfort zone and step into the inky blackness of Alien's sci-fi world? games™ chats to creative director Alistair Hope and lead designer Gary Napper about revalidating Ridley Scott's universe for the modern gamer

'Hiding is only ever a temporary solution' the game tells us on a loading screen. We knew that before, but we took our chances – cramming ourselves into a locker as the eponymous Alien stalked past, lit by shafts of mousy light, visible through the grate on the locker's door. We were holding our breath and pulling away from view (holding LB and pulling back on the left stick, simultaneously) but we misjudged the Alien… after it passed we tried to get a closer view, to see if it had passed. Next thing we knew, we were staring down into the blackness of two jaws, zenomorph saliva dripping onto our face. 'Hiding is only ever a temporary solution', we're reminded. Again.

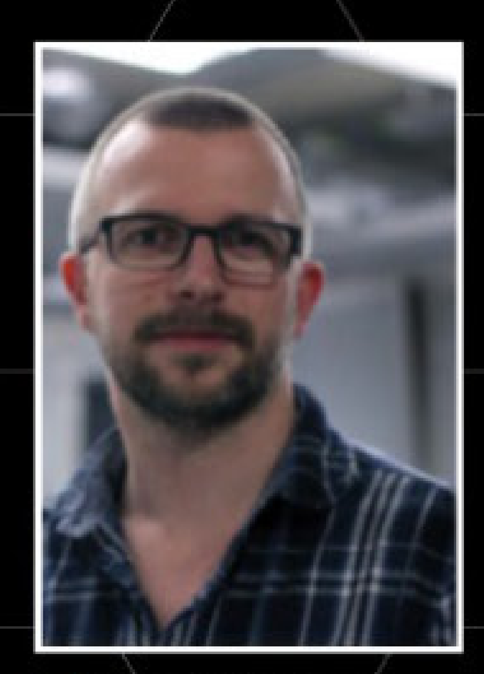
"You develop a very strong emotional connection to the Alien – and that's something I wasn't expecting when we were developing the game," says lead designer, Gary Napper. "In other games, you'll think 'Oh *this* guy killed me', but in [*Alien: Isolation*] it's more like 'Oh no… he's back… it's *that guy* again!' [laughter] You develop such a natural respect for the creature: when you see it, you alter your play-style immediately." Napper is right – the Alien commands your respect. We sat down with a large chunk of the game in SEGA's offices (where Creative Assembly had lovingly set the difficulty to Hard mode), and the first thing we noticed was how ferocious the Alien was. At least when it's in view, you can keep an eye on it; the second it disappears into the vents above or the pipes below, your blood runs cold.

"…When it's not there, you see these shadows dart past a wall and you think '…is that it?'" Napper explains, enthusiastically. "You project your fears of this creature onto the world itself, and sometimes that lack of its presence is more scary than when you *can* see it and you know where it is. That connection you build up of seeing the same creature again and again, and seeing it evolve and change, it makes you build up this very clear relationship with it." Because there's only one Alien – the same Alien that will kill you time and time again if you're not cautious – it starts to watch you, observe you, learn your behaviour.

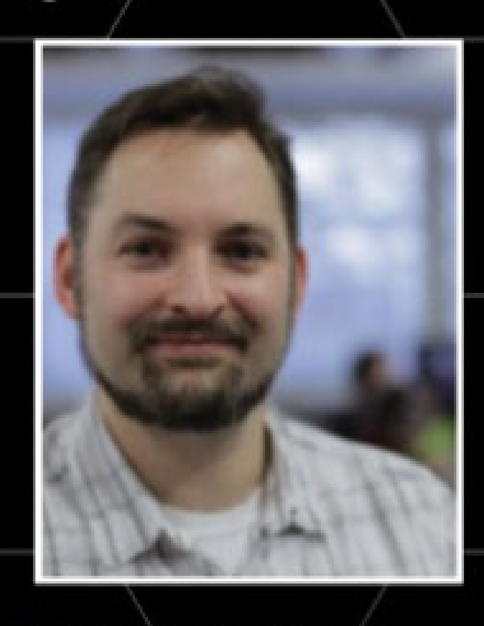
Our initial tactic for avoiding the stalking black creature was to create 'noisemakers' out of the scrap we collected and throw it down corridors before sneaking off down a different path – but after a few successes, the Alien picked up on our method, and on our fourth attempt at a 'noisemaker' gambit, the Alien headed the way it saw the improvised distraction come from… Cut to us crouching behind a desk in an abandoned medical wing, seeing the Alien's spiny tail drag on the floor next to us. We weren't sure if the Alien could detect any kind of movement at this range – even just rotating – so we sat, paralyzed, watching the tail edge slowly out of view, cringing at every single noise echoing through the cavernous Sevastopol space station.

> We sat, paralyzed, watching the tail edge slowly out of view, cringing at every noise

The prowling predator slinks off, completely out of view. We bring up the Motion Tracker (a loyal reconstruction of the 1979 icon) and note the surrounding area is clear – we're free to make a break for it. We take all of two steps (can you hear something wet and sticky underfoot?) before the Alien snags us from a vent above – a hanging column of sticky drool the only indicator of its presence. »



Alistair Hope is responsible for the game's direction.



Gary Napper is lead designer on Alien: Isolation.





Even without marines vs aliens gunfights, the motion tracker is still an extremely useful tool.





What sort of threats will you face besides the alien? We'll have to wait and see…



Another big question that won't be answered until you play - who exactly will you run into?

"It should never feel like the Alien killed you unfairly," laughs Napper. "Pretty much most of the things you get done for in the game are like 'Oh, I dropped a noisemaker at my feet,' or 'I thought I had time to run down this corridor'. Because the motion tracker only tracks, well, motion, the biggest error is assuming the Alien's not around if nothing's on the radar… some of the biggest scares of this game have come from that. 'I've been working on this game for years, I know it inside out', I think. I get to a door and look on the tracker, there's nothing, then the door opens and there's just this black creature looking down on you. Chomp. You're gone."

The emergent nature of the Alien's AI makes *Isolation* feel unlike anything we've ever played before. You will die – a lot – that's a given, but usually in survival horror games, dying is an iterative process: you trail a route, die, start again. Every death is part of a trial-and-error gambit, eventually highlighting the correct way to go through a process of elimination. No matter how engrossing and consuming the world is, you sniff out patterns in the AI. *Alien: Isolation* subverts that genre trope, and completely deconstructs it.

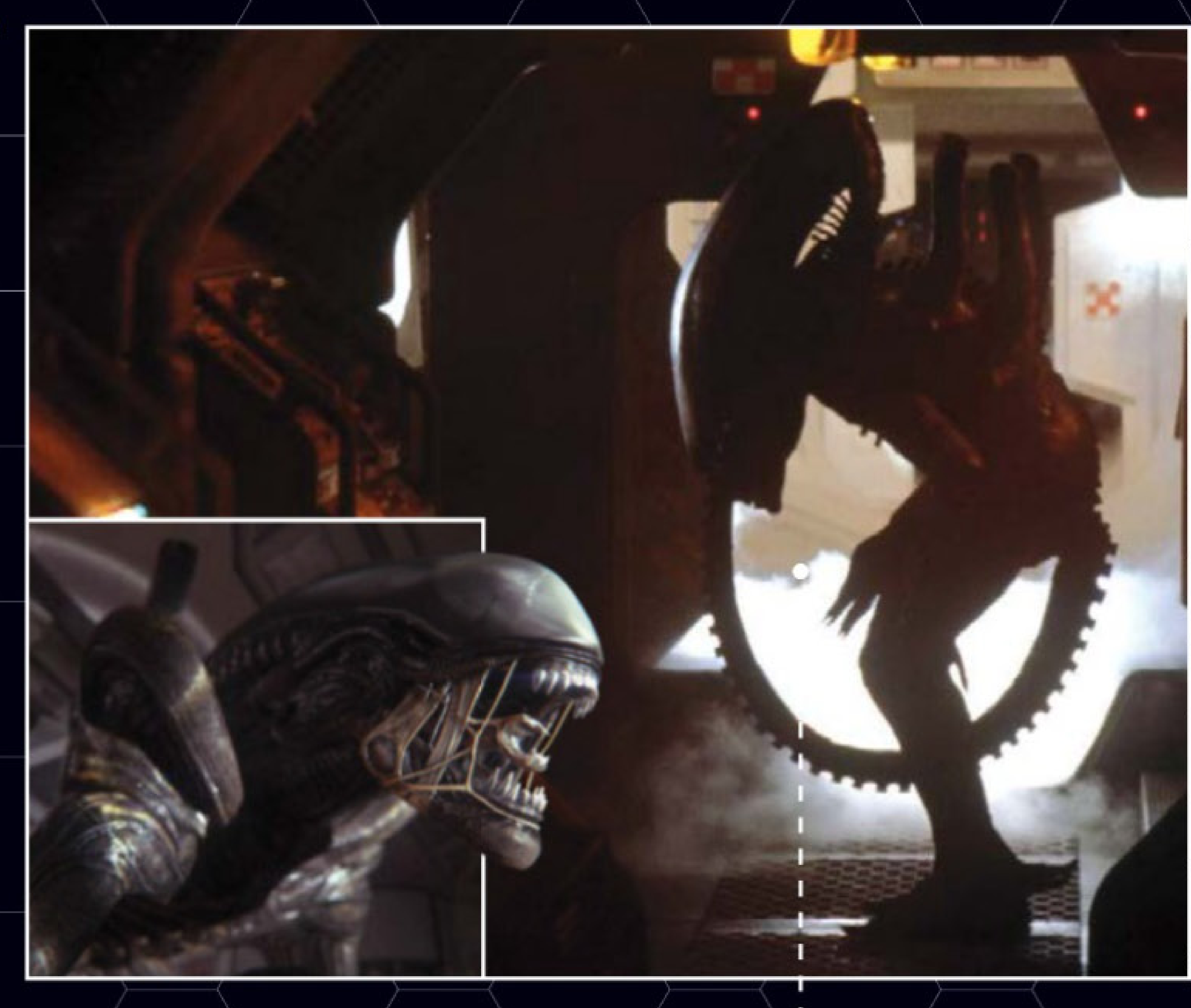
"I've always been interested in games that have that unpredictable AI, and it goes right back to those early *Tom Clancy* games that had a mission called 'Terrorist Hunt' (or something), where you could just load up a map with a bunch of bots," explains Napper. "The first time I died on this map, I thought 'Right, okay, there are guys behind this door'. So then you load it up again but there's no-one there… I will always remember that feeling of 'Oh, OK, this is *different*'. I think that's something that stands out in our game, too – when you respawn, the Alien is never in the same place, it's going to be doing something different. You throw a flare, and you'll notice a difference in behaviour between the first one you throw and the third one. It's very fun to watch [laughter]."

> I was adamant that we made the Alien menacing, monolithic, towering above you

Alien: Isolation does a fantastic job of making you feel *hunted* – in an entertainment format where we're so used to be empowered by guns, crazy abilities and seemingly infinite health, *Isolation* strips that all back and makes you, as a player, feel decidedly human – that is to say, vulnerable. "One of the things I was really adamant about during development was that our Alien would be *massive*, big enough to look down on the character," explains Hope. "The role of the Alien and even the size of it seems to have diminished over the course of the films, and I was adamant that we made it menacing, monolithic, towering above you. The Alien shouldn't be running around at your waistline like an angry dog, it should be above you, looking down, commanding your respect."

BLAST FROM THE PAST

Creative Assembly was given a tour of the original set from the 1979 film when it started production on Isolation, in hopes that it would give the creative team more of a grounding when it came to replicating the Seventies feel of the Sevastopol. It paid dividends, but the world itself isn't the only part of the game inspired by the original film:



THE ALIEN

"The [design team] went through so many iterations of how it should feel. They even went through the process of changing how the legs were mechanically working. The alien had to be this lethal killer that had to be able to get to you in a couple of seconds, yet was also slow and stalking and methodical. So when they had the legs from the film – you know, the guy in the rubber suit – you saw these human-like legs walk past and it just didn't feel quite right. So [the animation team] made the decision to give the alien these reverse knee-joints, so now it looks like a coiled spring – it looks like it *could* get to you in a second." – Gary Napper, lead designer



THE ORIGINAL RIPLEY

"It's been amazing – truly amazing – working with the original cast and to actually show them what we were doing, and to show them the route we were taking with the game and to see their reactions. Hearing those actors reprise their roles and re-do their lines transports you back in time, and for Sigourney [Weaver] to come aboard was special because she's declined to reprise the role of Ellen Ripley in games previously. it was a testament to the approach we've taken that she'd come back for this." – Alastair Hope, creative director



THE WORLD

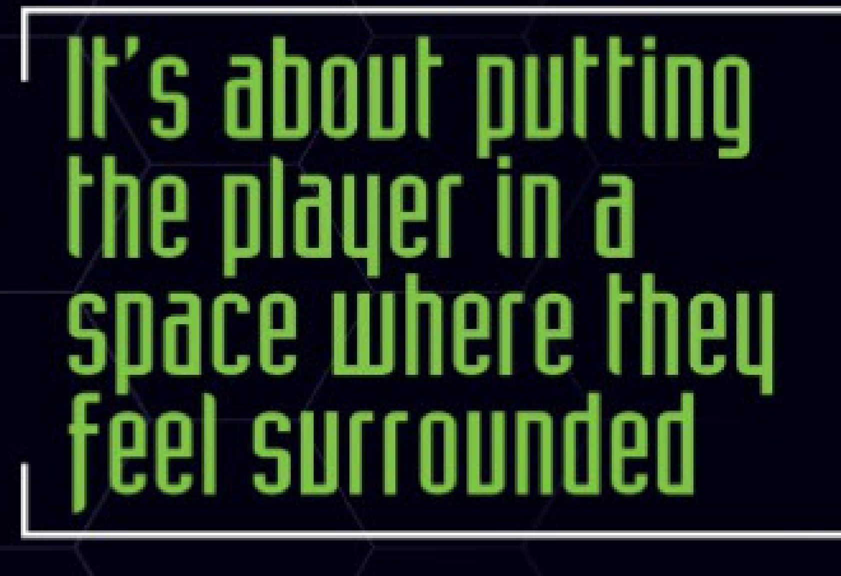
"People say the first *Alien* film is the first sci-fi survival horror film, and yeah, actually it was. The people on-board [the Nostromo] were just doing what they could to survive from this hideous, vicious creature. So we though, in a game, the environment for this kind of thing has to be unforgiving; it needs to feel like an oilrig in space. The Sevastopol is unforgiving, with sharp, rusty edges and nicotine-stained walls – it's a very lived-in, dirty grimy place that you really wouldn't want to be" – Gary Napper, lead designer





In honour of that vision, you'll spend most of the time crouched down, your line of sight low and often obstructed: *Alien: Isolation* mixes the immersion of an authentic game world with the captivating lo-fi sci-fi the *Alien* franchise built itself so successfully around. This is a survival horror game where nothing is going to help you – you're out on your own, playing as a Ripley worthy of the name. "You're never going to just open a cabinet and have everything you need to save you given to you," Napper explains. To survive, you'll have to scavenge the hastily evacuated space station – you have to find options for yourself, because the game won't offer them up willingly.

"It's all about immersion for me," explains Alistair Hope – creative director at Creative Assembly, "it's about putting the player in a space where they feel completely surrounded and sucked into the game. We want to work at that level rather than the more twitch, action-orientated one. For us, it's more about atmosphere – taking the player on a journey. The main aim in *Alien: Isolation* is to survive, and we've made the game quite intuitive, so that helps too – it means there's less of a disconnect between your brain and what you *want* to do. If you're not thinking about 'Oh, how do I do this, or this, or this' but rather, the controller naturally does what you want it to, it leads to a more enhanced, immersive experience. You want the player and the protagonist to be one and the same."



"I enjoy games where you can project yourself into the roles and you feel like you're the one making the calls and you've got the freedom of decision," continues Napper. "If you can tie a main character into the world and the mechanics well, and they feel relevant to everything, you don't have to make a character-lead game to make an immersive game." It's an interesting point Napper raises – although this game is exclusively seen through the eyes of Amanda Ripley, the story (from what we've played) seems to be much more about the Alien, and its presence on the ship, and how its arrival has exasperated tensions aboard the already waning Sevastopol. It taps into that watertight gothic trope of examining the monster – holding your humanity up against it and seeing how different (or not) the shadows you both cast turn out to be.

Hope hasn't just looked to the Alien franchise for inspiration when building Isolation – the survival horror genre has the benefit of being able to elicit huge emotional responses from players in the way it directly interacts with them and scares them; combined with the speculative fantasy nature of sci-fi, the potential for an experience that taps into the very human fight-or-flight instinct dormant within us all is palpable.

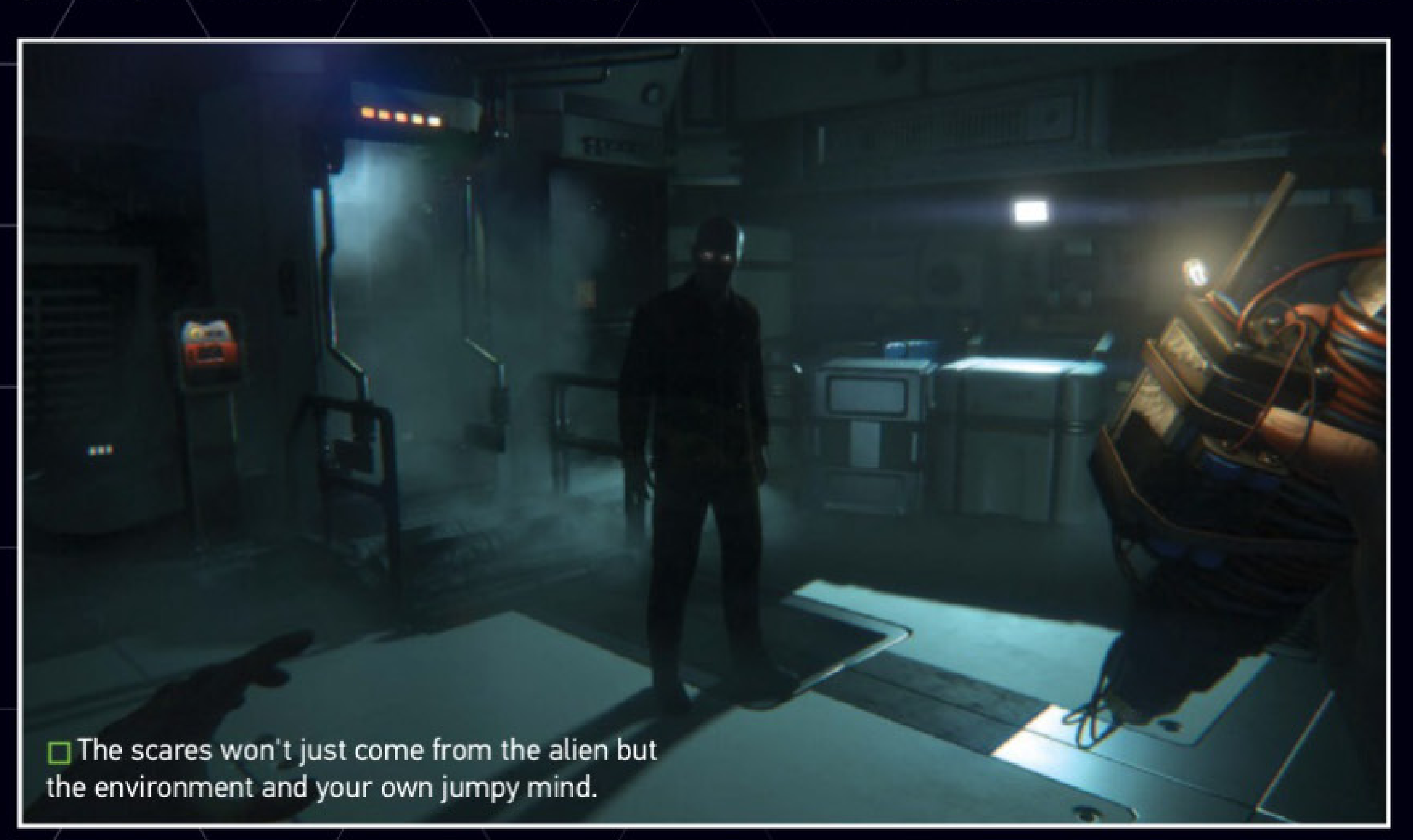
"One of the biggest inspirations for me was the original man versus Alien story, which is actually H. G Wells' *War Of The Worlds*," reveals Hope. "The Alien movie revolves around some people stuck in a spaceship with an Alien, and our game asks the question 'What if it got onto something much larger?' We have other survivors on the Sevastopol, and this infrastructure of a society that's fallen apart, and I guess that was inspired by the events in *War Of The Worlds*. Martians land in London, and within a day everything's fallen apart, people have turned on each other savagely and you go from what you understand to complete chaos."

That whole person versus person philosophy surfaces quite violently in *Alien: Isolation*; with your back against the wall, it's amazing how willing you become to use other humans as bait to clear the way for you. While it is possible to get through the entire game without killing anyone, the game pressures you so much that sometimes violence against your fellow man is the only option. We never actually killed anyone directly in our playthrough, but rather people that decided to attack us got themselves killed – gunfire will draw out the Alien, and once it gets its eyes fixed on you, there's no escape.

At one point during our demo, we wandered into a room with two engineers and a security guard. The guard heard our shoe squeak against the linoleum floor, and shouted a warning to us to leave – this was their hideout, after all – and fired a warning shot. Without missing a beat, we heard the pipes above us rumble with dreaded weight and the Alien slunk out of a vent behind the guard. As the doomed human paced

KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY

"For us, we never even thought about having a male lead: from the beginning, we made our test bed, and our test bed had a female protagonist in it," explains Napper when we asked him about the decision to keep the story in the Ripley family. "*Alien: Isolation* was always going to have a female lead, whether that was Amanda Ripley or a character of our own creation. It just felt right for the franchise, right for the setting – it's just *right*. We've had people ask stuff like 'Do you feel more vulnerable being a woman in the game?' ...well, anyone in that situation is going to be vulnerable! I don't think it matters what gender you are, but Ripley suits the game."



The scares won't just come from the alien but the environment and your own jumpy mind.


We'll be taken to some deliciously dark places, with both locale and narrative.

towards our hiding place, the Alien stalked up behind him, pierced his chest with its tail, and threw the corpse aside. The two engineers tried to run, but were swiftly dispatched. The guard had unwittingly killed his entire crew, just by trying to warn us away from his temporary den. That's altruism for you.

"I like to do what I call the 'canon playthrough', where Ripley won't actually kill anyone herself," Napper explains after he sees us use the Alien to take out a wandering band of armed survivors. "You can play the whole thing through without killing a single human, and for me that's quite important: in the film, you never see Ripley kill. Ever. But in videogames, it's very natural to take-on and attack humans. That was core to the way we designed [human AI], too; the humans aren't just faceless people that blindly attack you with guns. They see you, they give you warnings and tell you to back off because they're just as scared as you, they're just trying to defend themselves and you're a threat. They have no idea who you are and you might be after the same stuff they're after. That's as black and white as it gets – there are other people on the station that are just trying to run away: they're not armed, they don't pose a threat to you but they also complicate the situation somewhat."

Alien: Isolation has the potential to completely realign the survival horror genre – it looks at what the likes of *Resident Evil* or *Dead Space* have done recently and walks in the opposite direction, opting instead for a game built around exploration, caution and *survival* rather than arming you with a gun and saying 'Go!'. There's no co-op here, no pomp lacing the experience. This is a game that's been in development for three years, all while we've seen a horror renaissance courtesy of the indie scene. *Alien: Isolation* is promising to deliver a true horror experience in an authentic world with a triple-A budget. It's a game that Creative Assembly has always wanted to make, and every rusty bolt, every swinging light fixture, every audible click of the Alien's jaw... all of it holds the essence of a game made with commitment and respect to its source material.


Here's the star of the show but hopefully, you won't ever see the alien quite this close...

UNREAL POTENTIAL

WITH THE RECENT NEWS OF EPIC GAMES OPENING ITS FIRST UK OFFICES, **GAMES™** HEADS TO SUNDERLAND TO VISIT THE DEVELOPER FORMERLY KNOWN AS PITBULL TO TALK TO STUDIO HEAD ROBERT TROUGTON ABOUT THE COMPANY'S HISTORY AND BOLD NEW DIRECTION



In August 2014, Epic Games announced that it had snapped up Pitbull Studios. The news was not a huge surprise. While Pitbull, headed up by managing director Robert Troughton, has been active in one guise or another since 1996 (it started as Pitbull Syndicate, became Midway Studios – Newcastle and was revived as Pitbull Studios when Midway went bust), the past four years had seen a growing partnership with Epic.

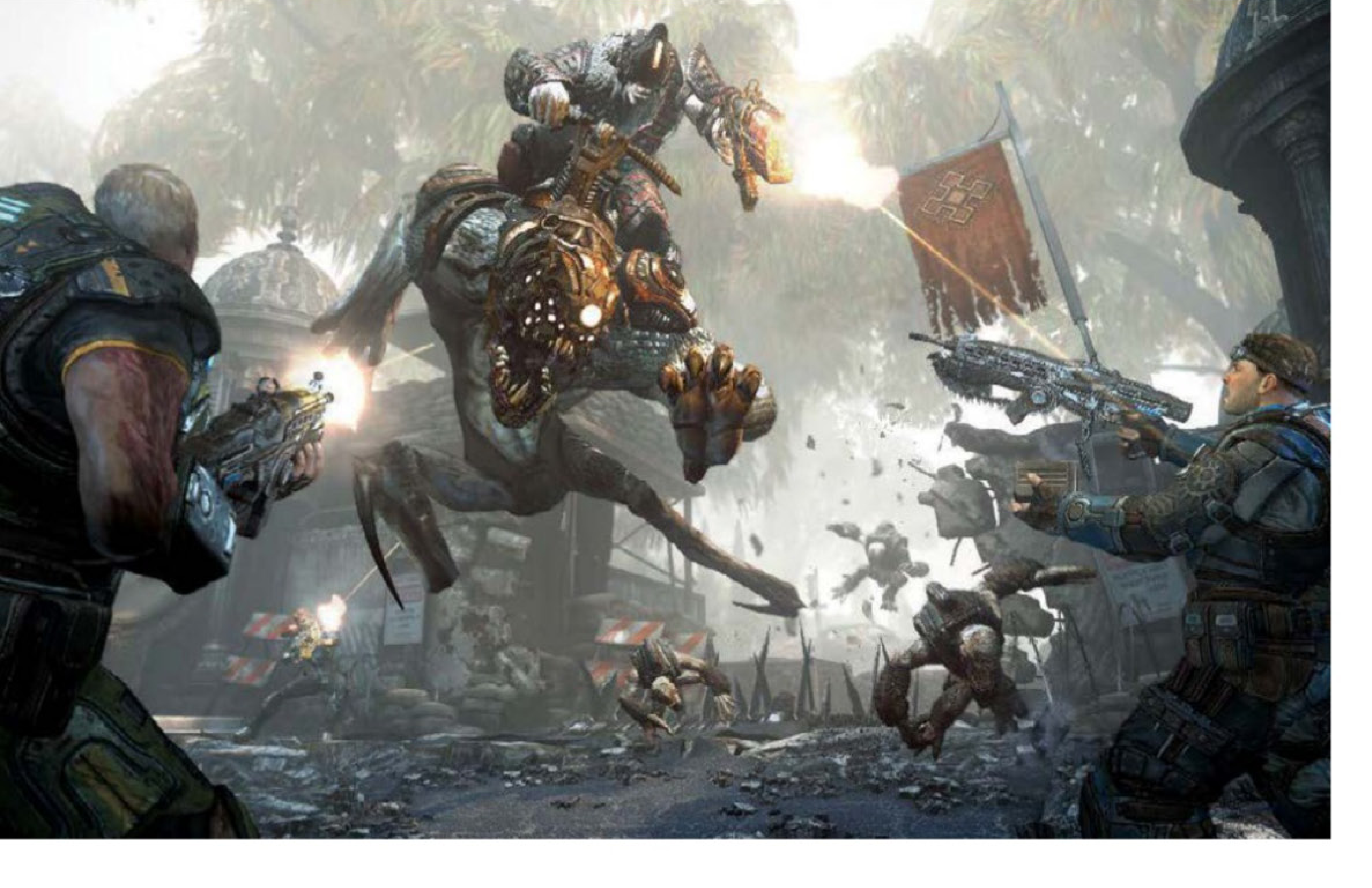
Pitbull Studios had spent much of its time working on Epic's groundbreaking Unreal Engine and, to that extent, the UK-based developer was already closely integrated into the operations of the North American company. The recent deal gives Epic Games a strong foothold in the UK. With offices in Sunderland, Leamington Spa and Guildford, Epic Games UK will tap into an incredible base of British talent and has further aspirations to expand.

The newly named British studio will, as it has done in the past, aid development on Unreal Engine 4, and it will work on forthcoming games such as *Fortnite*. Here, **games™** spoke to Robert about his past experience in gaming and what the deal means for him. We also spoke to Mike Gamble, who licenses the Unreal Engine across Europe.

First of all, many congratulations on the deal. Is there a lot of excitement around the studio about the future direction of the company?

Mike Gamble: There is always excitement about the future at Epic. That may sound very trite, but it is actually really, really true. We're going through a massively hard time at the moment with the release of the engine subscription, kind of starting from the transition from new platforms to several powerful mobile hardware. But there hasn't been such an exciting time in the industry generally for a long time.

What attracted Epic to Pitbull Studios?



their teams on every different aspect of Unreal Engine 4. The UK has a lot of very talented developers.

As the head of the studio, can you talk about your career and how you came to be fronting Epic Games UK?
RT: I started back in 1994. I got a job straight away working for Reflections on *Destruction Derby*, and pretty soon after that I branched out into my own company. Working on *Destruction Derby* was very successful, and we saw the potential there. We decided we could do things by ourselves. I mean, studios at the time were really small; *Destruction Derby* was made by a team of five people. We took the core team and decided to make our own company with it.

At that time it was mainly driving games that you were into, wasn't it?
RT: It was very hard to go to publishers with anything else. They were very risk-adverse, you know. We wanted to work on different games at the time, but everyone saw us as the *Destruction Derby* team. After we moved on to the *Test Drive* series with *Test Drive 4* in 1997, it was just racing game after racing game. We mainly developed the *Test Drive* series at Pitbull Syndicate.

After Pitbull Syndicate you then sold the company to Midway Games – what prompted this?
RT: I think at the time we just wanted the security because we were a kind of one-game company, so going from contract to contract and it made sense for us to sell and then gain all of the security of being in a larger company. At the time we decided to sell, we were a company of around 60 people, and we wanted the security of a large publisher for them at the time. We moved on to *LA Rush* and *Wheelman* with Midway, and that was my introduction to the Unreal Engine.

What was the feeling after Midway Games ended up closing not long after?
RT: That was massive. We had some forewarning that it was going to happen. When they filed for Chapter 11, it took around six months for it to finally come in and close the studio, so it gave »

"Having Pitbull in the UK gives us access to really talented engineers here in Europe"

MG: Having Pitbull in the UK gives us access to really talented engineers here in Europe, which will help immensely when it comes to supporting our overseas [team]. They are not going to become Epic Support UK. They are still a developer and they are still developing the engine. Just being able to have those resources to hand when it comes to crunch and when a developer needs a hand, it will make life so much easier.

Can you discuss then what type of projects we can expect Epic Games UK to be making in the future?
Robert Troughton: The work on Unreal Engine 4 is never going to be finished; there are going to be constant iterations and the addition of new technology and features. All major development will be ongoing, and there's a lot of work there. We're looking to grow the studios, especially in the Guildford area: we want to tap into the talent there, and we're going to be constantly growing, I would think.

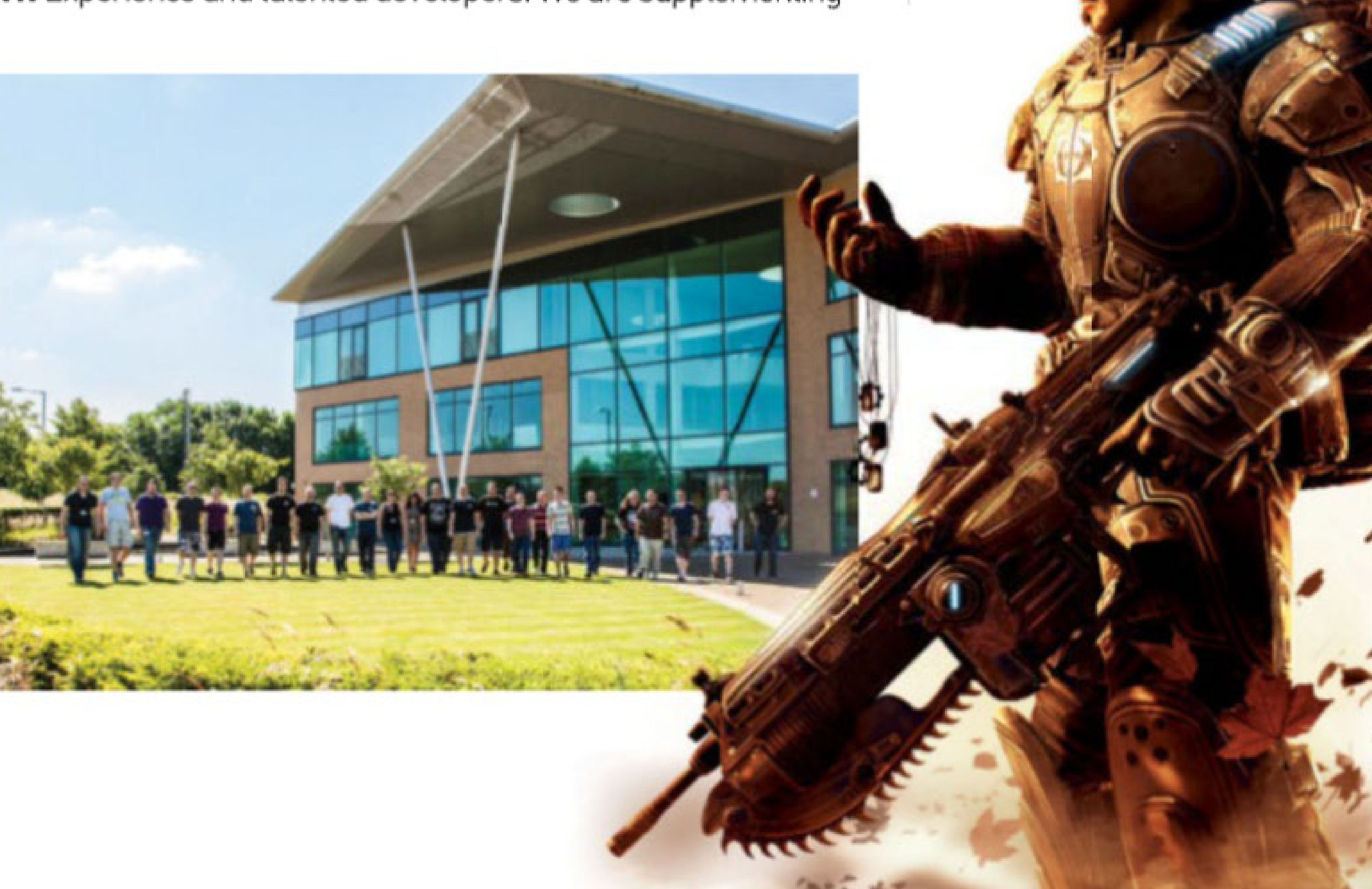
Pitbull has been well established for a number of years now, but what is it exactly that the studio is able to offer Epic as a company?
RT: Experience and talented developers. We are supplementing

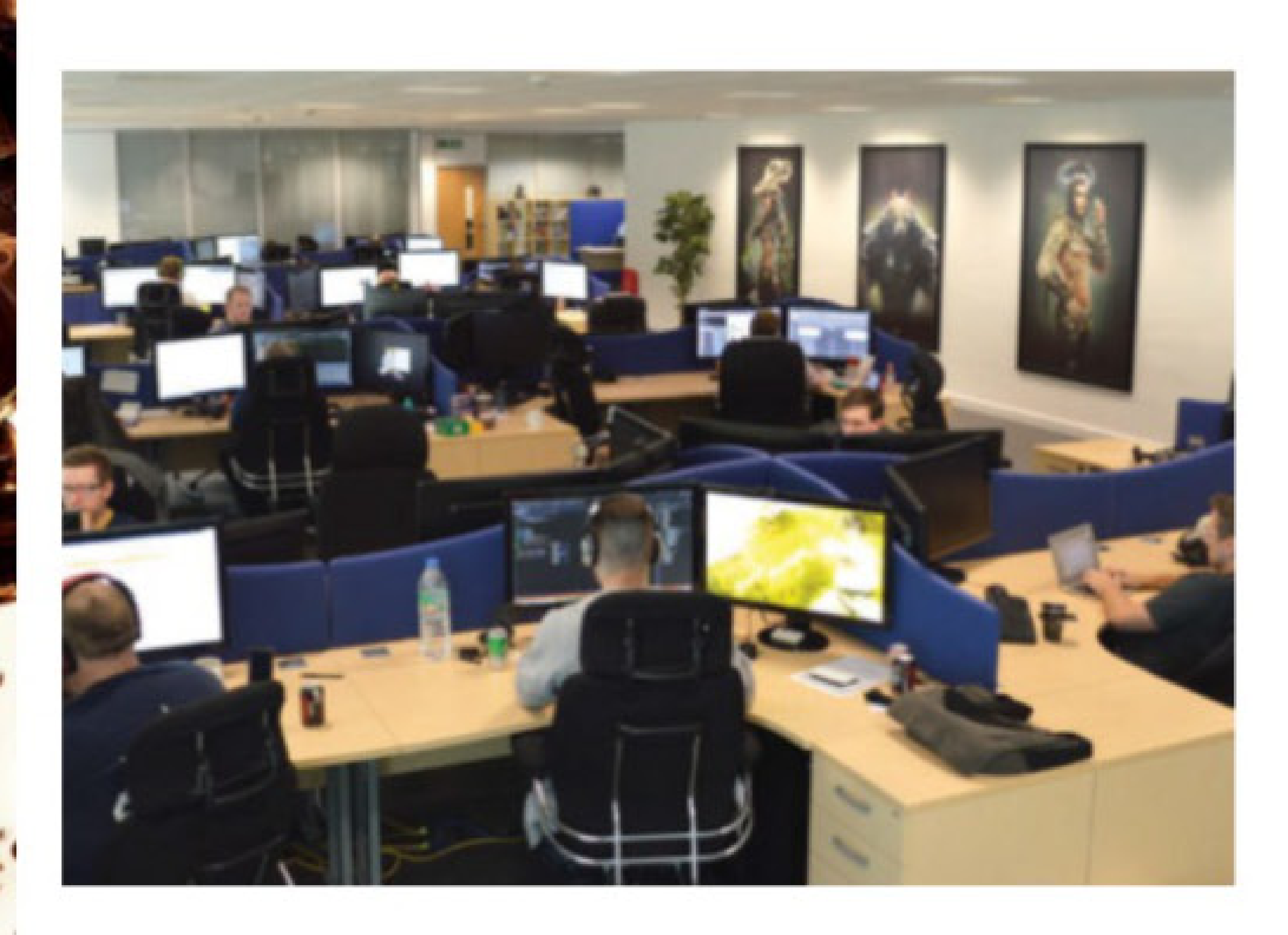


● Robert Troughton and some of the 40 people who worked at Pitbull Studio (now Epic Games UK).



● Pitbull worked closely with Epic Games on *Gears Of War: Judgement*.





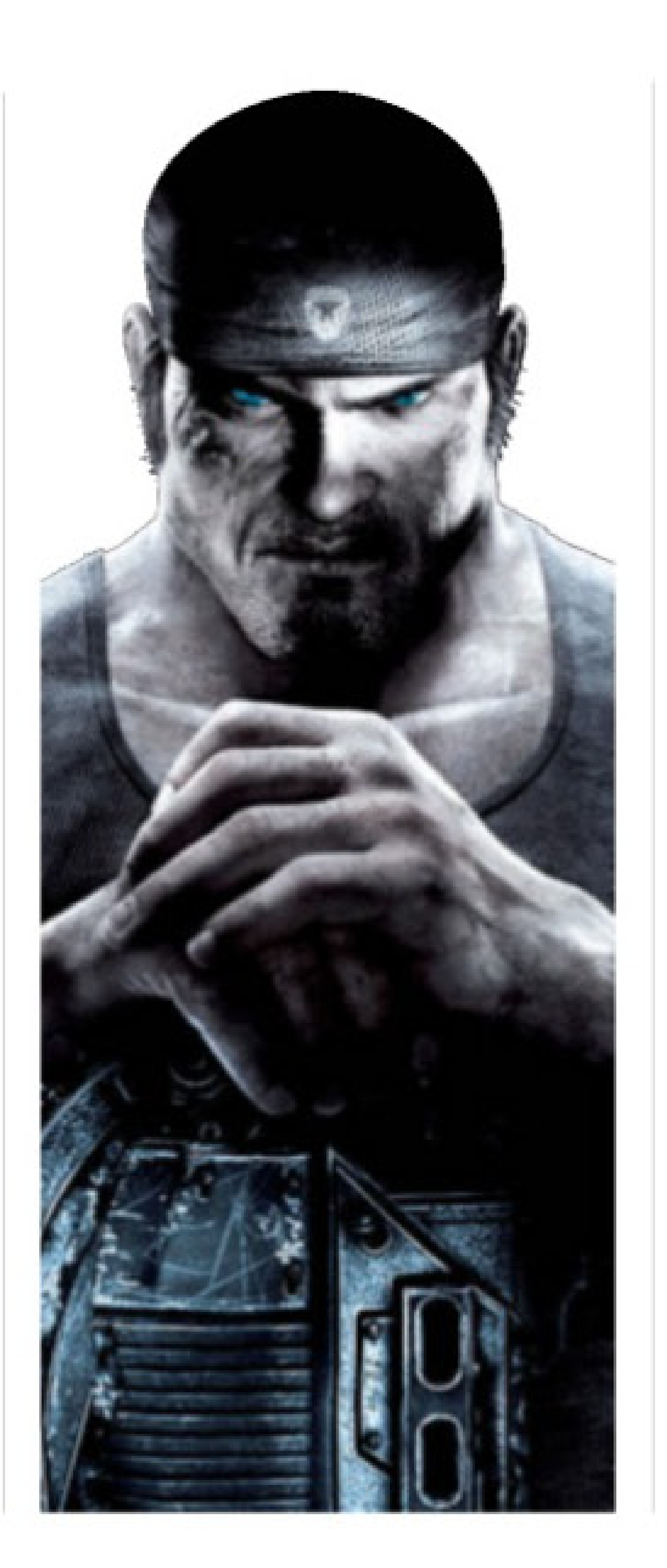
people a chance to look at other options in that time. A lot of people branched off to create Atomhawk, the programming team went off to CCP, and I think pretty much everybody had something somewhere. It was a really good team.

A year after that, you created Pitbull Studio and revived the Pitbull name again. Then, you started to work on games in the health sector. What was the reasoning behind this change in mindset?

RT: While I was working at CCP, we were looking at ways of rebooting Pitbull, and the opportunity came up at the NHS. It was really interesting. It was a chance to create something that was good for the health sector. The main thing for me was that it enabled me to create a games studio. Alongside working for the NHS, we were outsourcing and contracting work from Epic. It got us to the point where we could work with them.

And then it wasn't long before you were able to work with the Unreal Engine again…

RT: At the time we'd been talking to Epic for quite a while, and I think they had appreciated the work we had done with *Wheelman*. It was a very unique game for the Unreal Engine; it was the first-open world racing game. It showed what we could do with the engine. Epic then gave us the chance to work on the Unreal Engine and impress them.



Having worked on the engine across various titles, what were you specifically offering Epic in terms of advancing the engine technology?

RT: I think initially we were just taking some of the weight off their programmers so that they could concentrate on newer things. We were working on Unreal Engine 3 while they were starting on the elements of Unreal Engine 4. Over time when we proved what we could do, we got to work on the more interesting things as well. That would be the rendering, physics and some of the features that were going into Unreal Engine 4.

At Pitbull Studio you had developed *Circus Challenge* and *BigTopTHD*, but you were moving away from creating games in their entirety and working on helping other people create their games. These included *Silent Hill: Downpour*. Was this a more lucrative business model?

RT: I was looking at the market at the time, and it would have been good to work on our own games, but it is an extremely volatile market – or certainly was at the time – and we just didn't want to take the risk. We looked at what other studios were doing, and there were so many that were jumping on the iOS bandwagon. We didn't want to risk going there, so we supported existing games and we worked with a lot of other studios. We did what we thought was right for the people that we had working at Pitbull.

> "The whole team at Pitbull was always really excited to work with Epic on the Unreal Engine and Gears Of War"

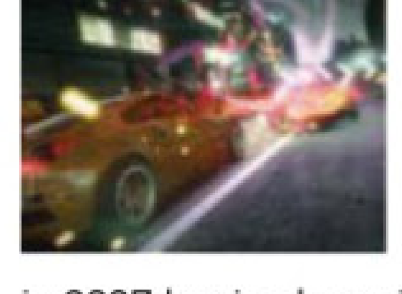


One of the key collaborations was with Epic on *Gears Of War: Judgement*. What did Pitbull bring to the game?

RT: We had some programmers helping out on the multiplayer side of it, optimising that part of the game, but our role was just getting that game out of the door and helping them with that. Our guys were fully integrated into the team, and it's the same process that we have now with Unreal Engine 4. We didn't particularly concentrate on a particular aspect of it; we just supported what we could.

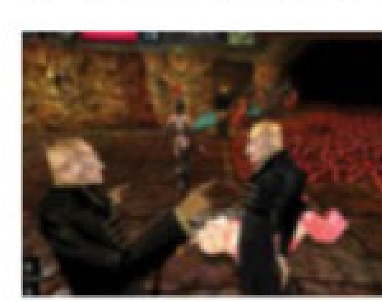
The Americans are coming! Pitbull Studio is not the only UK developer to have been snapped up by a major US concern…

BIZARRE CREATIONS



● Californian publisher Activision snapped up Liverpool-based Bizarre Creations in 2007, having been impressed by a host of racing titles, including *Metropolis Street Racer* and *Project Gotham Racing*. BC also made the brilliant arcade game *Geometry Wars*. But although *Blur* in 2010 was a commendable effort, sales of the game fell short of expectations. In a move that shocked the industry, Activision pulled the plug on the studio in 2011, leading to some 200 redundancies.

BULLFROG PRODUCTIONS



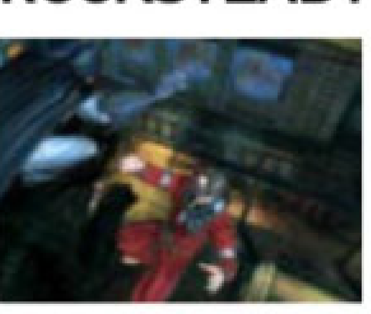
● Founded by Peter Molyneux and Les Edgar in 1987, Bullfrog was responsible for a great many blockbuster titles, like *Populous*, *Syndicate*, *Magic Carpet* and *Theme Park*. It was acquired in 1995 by Electronic Arts, Bullfrog's publisher, and continued going for a good number of years. That said, Molyneux lasted until 1997 when, after completing *Dungeon Keeper*, he left to form Lionhead Studios. Bullfrog closed its doors in 2004 when it was merged with EA UK.

PSYGNOSIS



● Titles such as *Shadow Of The Beast* and *Obliterator* wowed gamers, and the company had also made its name publishing other developers' games, DMA Design's *Lemmings* being among the most notable. *WipEout* defined the early days of the PlayStation and helped it to transcend into club culture. By 2001 it had become SCE Studio Liverpool, but in 2012 despite its success, Sony decided to concentrate its efforts elsewhere and closed it.

ROCKSTEADY STUDIOS

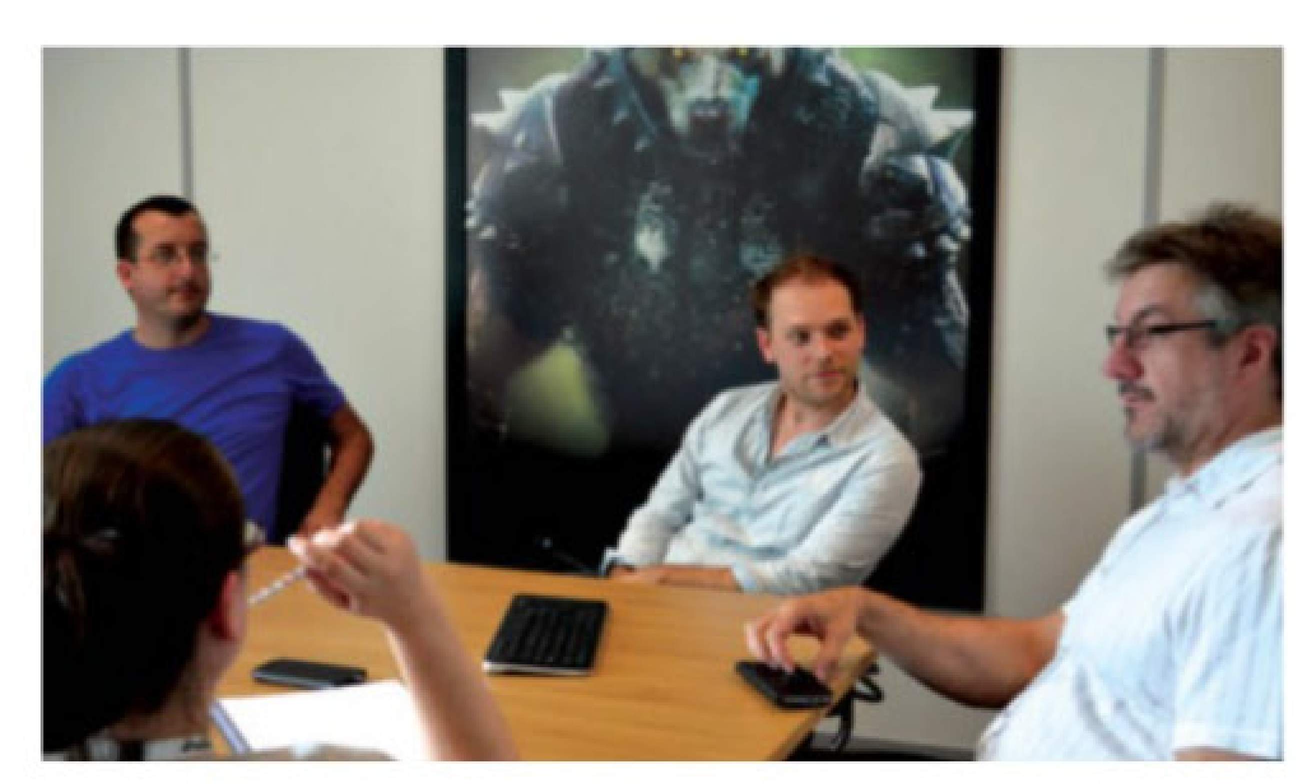


● *Batman: Arkham Asylum* made gamers sit up and take notice, and it also caused a stir in the offices of Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment, which snapped it up the London developer in 2010. *Batman: Arkham City* became another major success, and while the studio was not asked to produce *Batman: Arkham Origins*, there are high hopes for *Batman: Arkham Knight*.

Did you feel a part of Epic at that stage?
RT: All of our guys had been fully integrated into the Epic team. The whole team at Pitbull was always really excited to work with them on the Unreal Engine and *Gears Of War*. It was a chance to work on technology that is huge at the moment in the games industry; there are no other games engines that compete. And certainly we'd never worked with a developer before that was as talented at everything that they do as Epic. Epic has always been really good to us, and the whole team has always loved the work.

Now that the acquisition is official, how will Pitbull fit into the infrastructure at Epic?
MG: I think they will fit in perfectly. They have worked together for a long time, and they have been an integrated team anyway. I think well and truly there will not be much in the way of pain in trying to make that integration, because it's been made already.

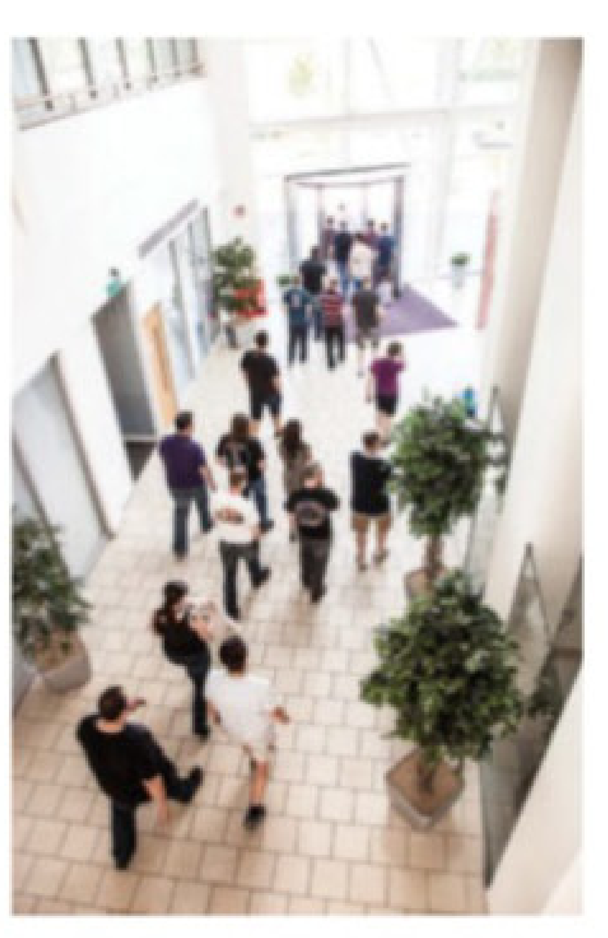
Will that be felt on the forthcoming game, *Fortnite*? What role have you played with that game?
RT: We're doing everything and anything. Anywhere we are able to add support, we work on that. We're pretty much working across the board and on any area that we can.



● Robert Troughton (in blue) having a meeting with his team in the Sunderland office.



● Mike Gamble feels Europe has a really vibrant development scene compared to just a few years ago.



● Pitbull's premises in Sunderland, now part of Epic Games UK.

In a sense Pitbull has gone in a circle of sorts. Pitbull Syndicate was sold to Midway following a period of expansion and Pitbull Studio has been sold to Epic, again following a more recent expansion. Are there lessons to be learned from Midway?
RT: I think they are two completely different things. For 15 years, Midway didn't really make a profit, and Epic are just so professional compared to… yeah, I don't really want to say any more.

Will being part of Epic have an impact on the ethos of Pitbull as it was?
RT: No, I don't think so. We've worked with them for so long now, and I like to think that we have been doing a good job, so I think we'll be doing very much the same. The values of what was Pitbull are very similar to Epic. We value our employees and trust everybody, and there are not a lot of management overheads. A lot of companies tend to over-manage, but we treat people right and they enjoy the work that they do.

Is the UK this fertile ground for developing? There was a stage, not long ago, where there a lot of talk of a brain drain.
MG: I think it's best to talk not just about the UK, but Europe as a whole. It's a really vibrant development scene now. It's very different to what it was five years ago and very different to how it is in the States. We had a lot of monolithic studios split or go bust or close [in Europe], but actually, the reality is that very few of those guys left the games industry; they became other studios. They joined other studios they started up, so there's a really strong independent scene. But it is independent in so far as they are independent developers – they are not owned by publishers or anyone other than themselves. Yet they have real triple-A skills and real triple-A values. I think this gaming generation will see this coming to the fore. European development really shines in those sort of areas.



The Last Guardian

Developer: **Team Ico**
Announced: **2009**

The Pitch

■ INSPIRED BY the relationship players developed with Agro in *Shadow Of The Colossus*, *The Last Guardian* will explore the bond between a young boy and hit hawk-cat thing in a sort-of sequel to Ico and the aforementioned *Shadow Of The Colossus*. From a gameplay perspective, players are tasked with utilising both the brute force of Trico (the creature) and the stealthy agility of the boy to solve a selection of puzzles and navigating through the world co-dependently.

Where Is It?

■ AS RECENTLY as gamescom, Sony once again offered an update on its sought-after exclusive. Sony Worldwide Studios boss Shuhei Yoshida confirmed that the game is still in development but, as many had guessed, went through a major overhaul due to technical hitches. The consensus is that the elongated development is also due to a platform shift from PlayStation 3 to PlayStation 4.

Status: **Active**

15 GAMES STUCK IN DEVELOPMENT HELL

No matter how the industry rumbles, or how loud the vociferous outcries of gamers are, certain games just seem to be shackled permanently to the programmer's desk, languishing in development limbo. But that's not to say all are destined to become vapourwear, never to break free and see the light of day. Some great games, like *Diablo III* or *Dragon Age: Origins*, have emerged from the darkness of protracted game development to reach overriding success. And next on that list is *Wasteland 2*, and in light of the game's release this month – after years in various states of production before crowd-sourcing offered its makers the opportunity to finally realise their vision – **games™** takes a look at the most promising titles currently stuck in videogame purgatory and offers an update on their sought-after status.



Tekken x Street Fighter

Developer: **Bandai Namco**
Announced: **2010**

The Pitch

ORIGINALLY ANNOUNCED alongside *Street Fighter x Tekken*, Bandai Namco's half of the fighting franchise crossover transported the 2D icons from Capcom's brawler into *Tekken*'s 3D arena. We know Ryu and Jin Kazama will be two of the combatants but the rest of the roster remains as big a mystery as the game's release date.

Where Is It?

PROGRESS HAS been alarmingly slow, even by this list's snail-like pace, leaving many to assume that the game had been outright cancelled. Fear not, because at Comic Con this year producer Katsuhiro Harada confirmed that the game is still in development, but due to the slate of other fighting games in development at Bandai Namco – *Tekken Revolution, SoulCalibur: Lost Swords, Rise of Incarnates, Tekken 7* and now *Pokkén Tournament* – that the publisher hasn't found the right time to release it. But with over two years between Bandai's title and its Capcom-developed companion, *Tekken x Street Fighter* will have to come out fighting to make the wait worthwhile. Our fingers are crossed.

Status: **Active**

Prey 2

Developer: Human Head Studios
Announced: 2011

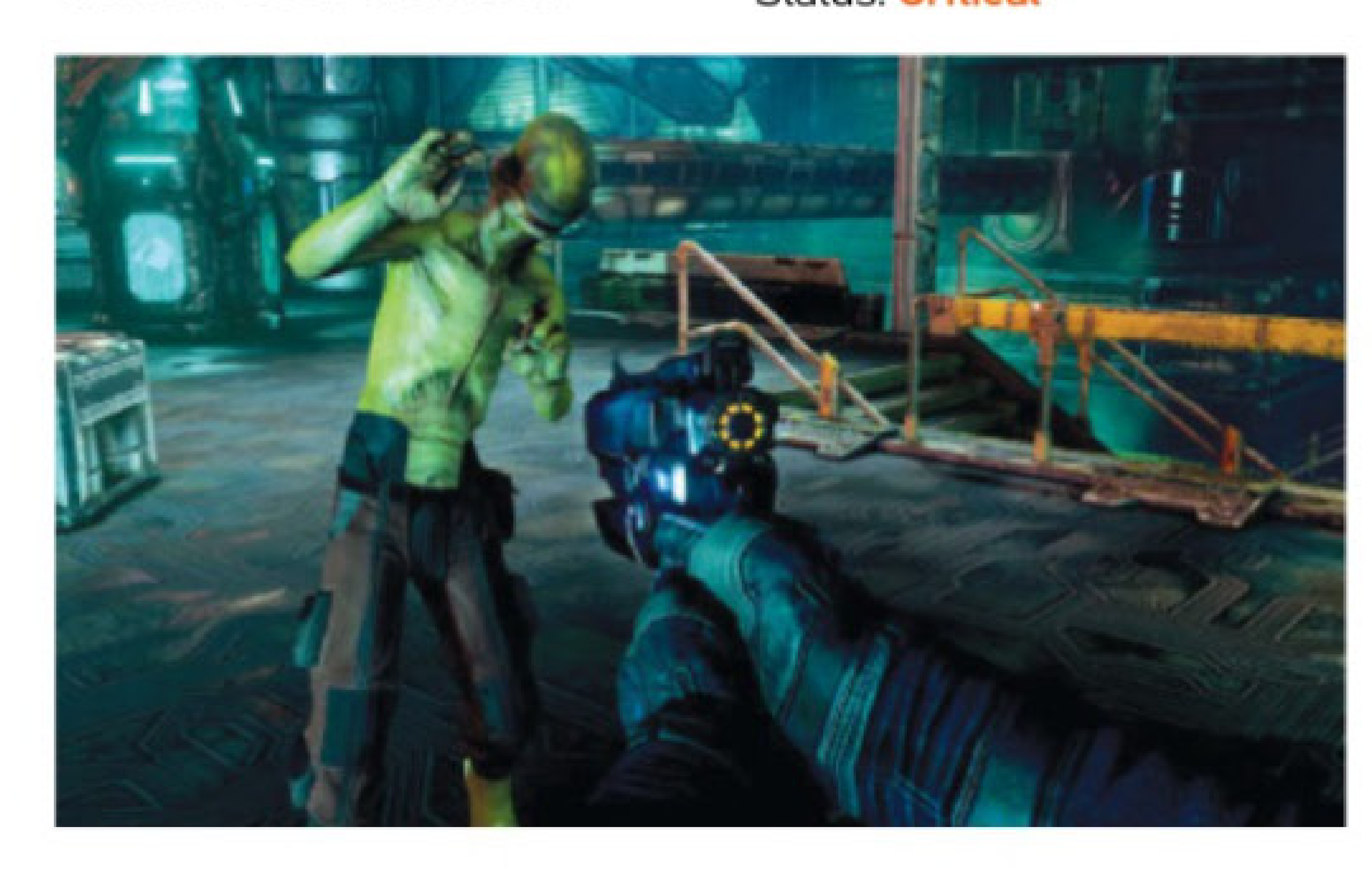
The Pitch

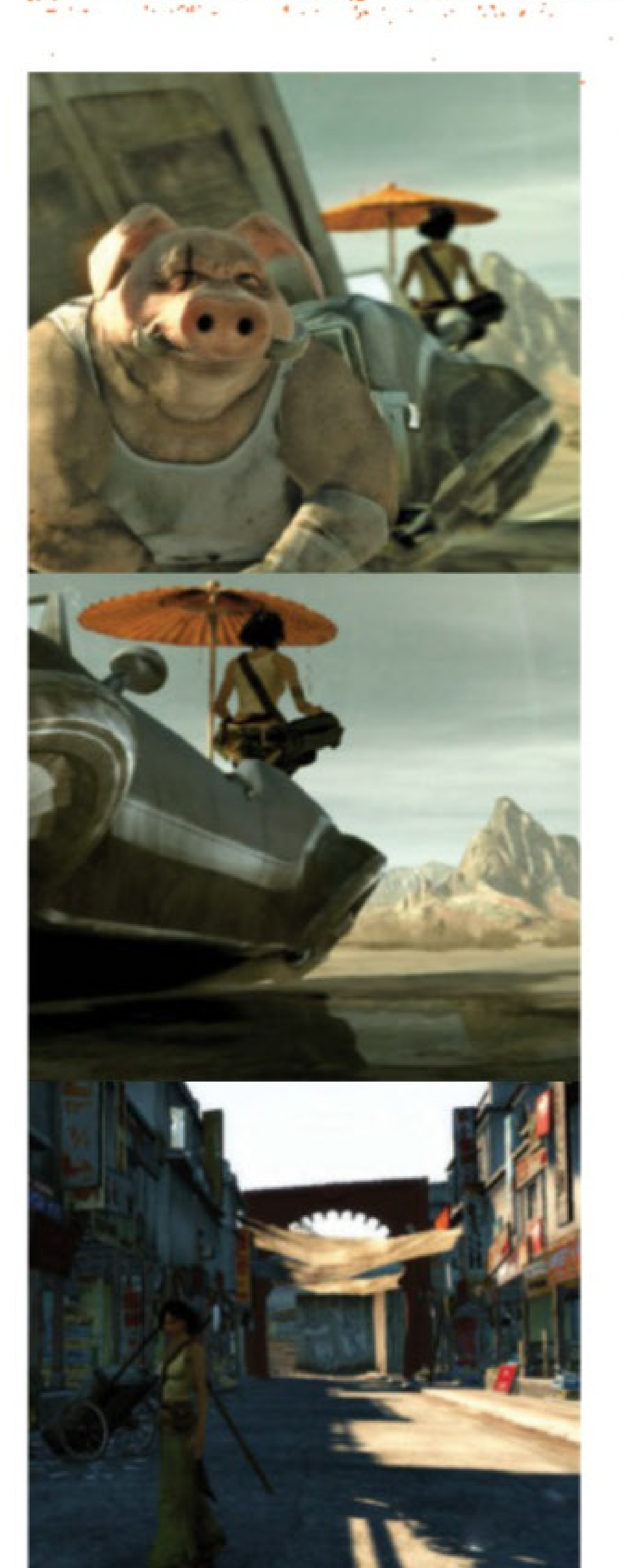
A SEQUEL to the 2006 game, which would interweave with the original's narrative and present a new protagonist – U.S. Marshall Killian Samuels – who crash lands onto the Sphere and, after some time living on Exodus, becomes a high-tech bounty hunter. Running on a heavily modified version of the Id Tech 4 engine, *Prey 2* would join *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Doom* in Bethesda's new wave of first-person shooters.

Where Is It?

RUMOURS HAD been swirling that Human Head Studios had ceased developing the title and the duty had passed on to Dishonored developer Arkane Studios (via Obsidian Entertainment briefly). The flow of images and footage has long since dried up and It's been over a year since the game was mentioned. With *Doom* on the horizon, it looks like *Prey 2* has been put on the backburner.

Status: **Critical**





Beyond Good & Evil 2

Developer: Ubisoft Montpellier
Announced: 2008

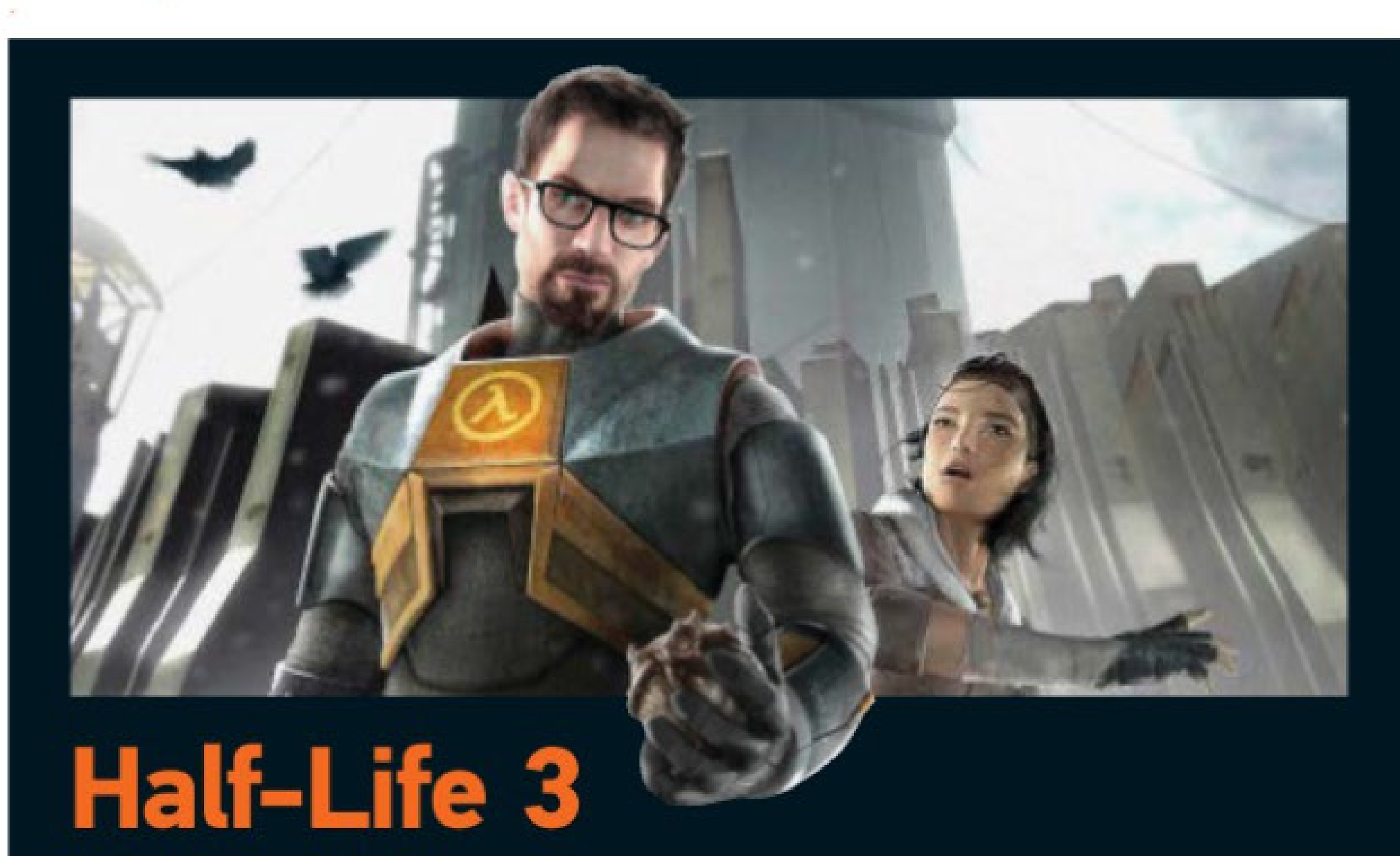
The Pitch:

THE SEQUEL to a game that is trumped only by *Enslaved* in the underrated stakes, *Beyond Good & Evil 2* will be the second part in Michel Ancel's proposed trilogy, targeted at a broader audience to avoid the commercial failure of its predecessor. Jade and Pey'j's adventure continues but all we've seen is the teaser footage released years back of the duo stranded in the desert.

Where Is It?

UBISOFT AND Ancel have confirmed the game's active development as recently as E3 2014, but have so far avoided confirming any firm details. Reports suggest that part of the delay is due to the shift from past gen to current console hardware. Nevertheless, it looks like it won't be long before we get our first glimpse of the game in action.

Status: **Active**



Half-Life 3

Developer: Valve
Announced: 2006

The Pitch:

DO YOU really need to know? That spectacle-wearing, crowbar-wielding theoretical physicist heads off once more doing a damn sight more good ridding the world of combine and zombies hordes than practicing any actual science. The last chapter in the story arc started in *Half-Life 2*, could this be the end of Gordon Freeman's adventures?

Where Is It?

IT'S BEEN a decade since *Half-Life 2* was released and several years since *Half-Life 2: Episode 2* (and we can assume *Episode* 3 has evolved into *Half-Life 3*). Valve has remained quiet ever since, but intrepid code crackers in the last couple of years have found evidence pointing towards the sequel's debut on Source Engine 2. With rumours of *Dota 2* switching to the new engine, it shouldn't be too long until an announcement.

Status: **Active**



Agent

Developer: **Rockstar Games** Announced: **2008**

The Pitch:

SET IN the late Seventies, players are immersed in the Cold War from the point of view of covert operatives. Delving into the clandestine world of counter-intelligence, espionage and political assassinations, *Agent* focuses on evoking a period aesthetic – think All The President's Men meets Splinter Cell but with a Rockstar twist.

Where Is It?

ASIDE FROM a few leaks a few years ago, Rockstar has barely commented on the status of development. The only suggestion that the game is still in development is from a couple of trademarks for the game registered by Take-Two just over a year ago. However, given Rockstar's characteristically long development cycles and penchant for emulating Hollywood (Seventies political thriller seems right up the studio's alley), we wouldn't write this off as vapourwear yet.

Status: **Critical**



Six Days In Fallujah

Developer: **Atomic Games** Announced: **2009**

The Pitch

A HISTORICAL third-person shooter developed by Atomic Games in conjunction with the US Marines, *Six Days In Fallujah* attempts to recreate the horror and intensity of a real-world war situation – the heavy urban combat of Fallujah during the Iraq War in 2004. The game is told from the perspective of the soldiers present during the conflict, with interviews with those involved interspersed between chapters of gameplay.

Where Is It?

THE GAME was more-or-less complete when publisher Konami baulked on releasing the game due to the controversial nature of its subject. The studio has stated on several occasions that it's hopeful it can find a replacement publisher, but even that optimism looks to have diminished as news has dried up over the last year.

Status: **Comatose**

S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2

Developer: **GSC Game World**
Announced: **2010**

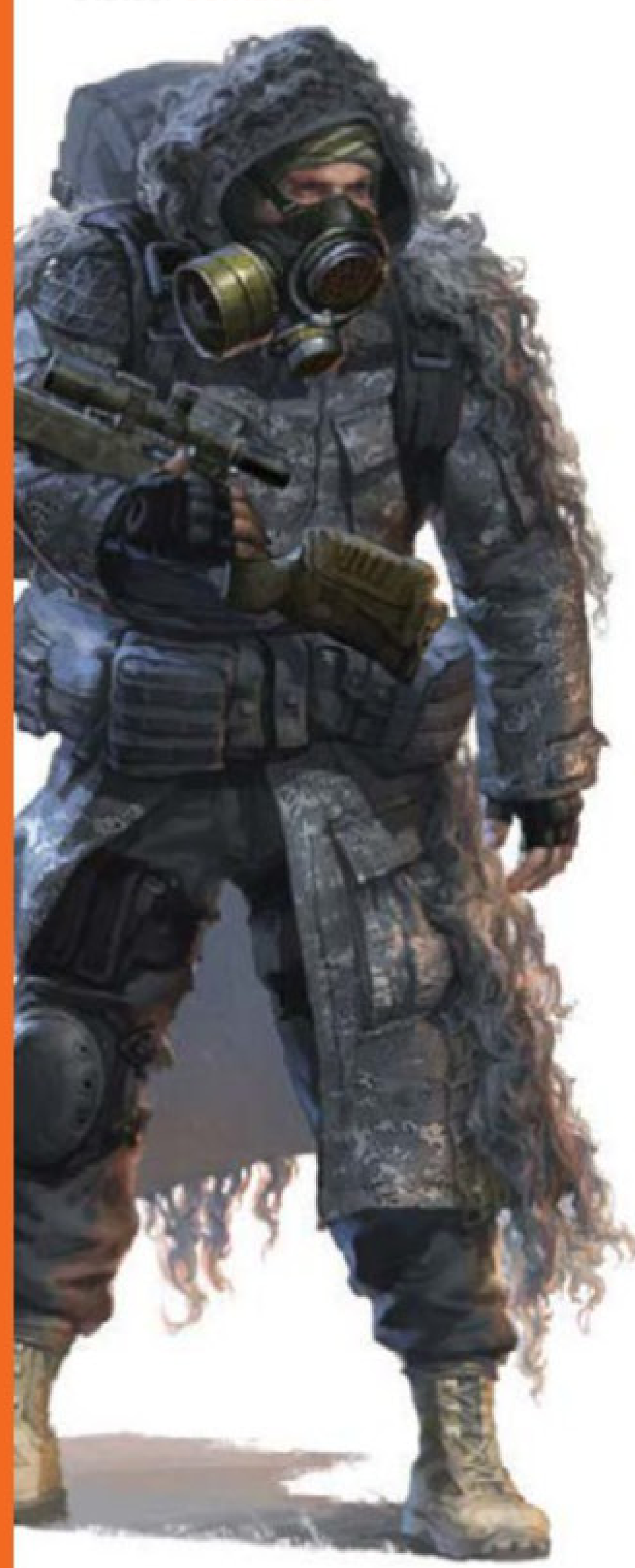
The Pitch:

ANOTHER CHEERY stroll through the radiated husk of Chernobyl, players are once again tasked with investigating the supernatural goings-on, shooting mutants between the eyes and chugging vodka like Putin. With an open-world game map and a series of new mutants and artefacts to discover, it's *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* turned up to 11.

Where Is It?

THE DEVELOPMENT has been officially frozen with developer GSC Game World shuttering some time after the announcement. Rumours swirled that Bethesda picked up the rights but those have since been proven false. However, many of the original team has since moved to West Games, who recently had its controversial crowd-funding campaign for a spiritual sequel called *Areal* suspended by Kickstarter.

Status: **Comatose**





Whore of the Orient

Developer: **Team Bondi**
Announced: **2012**

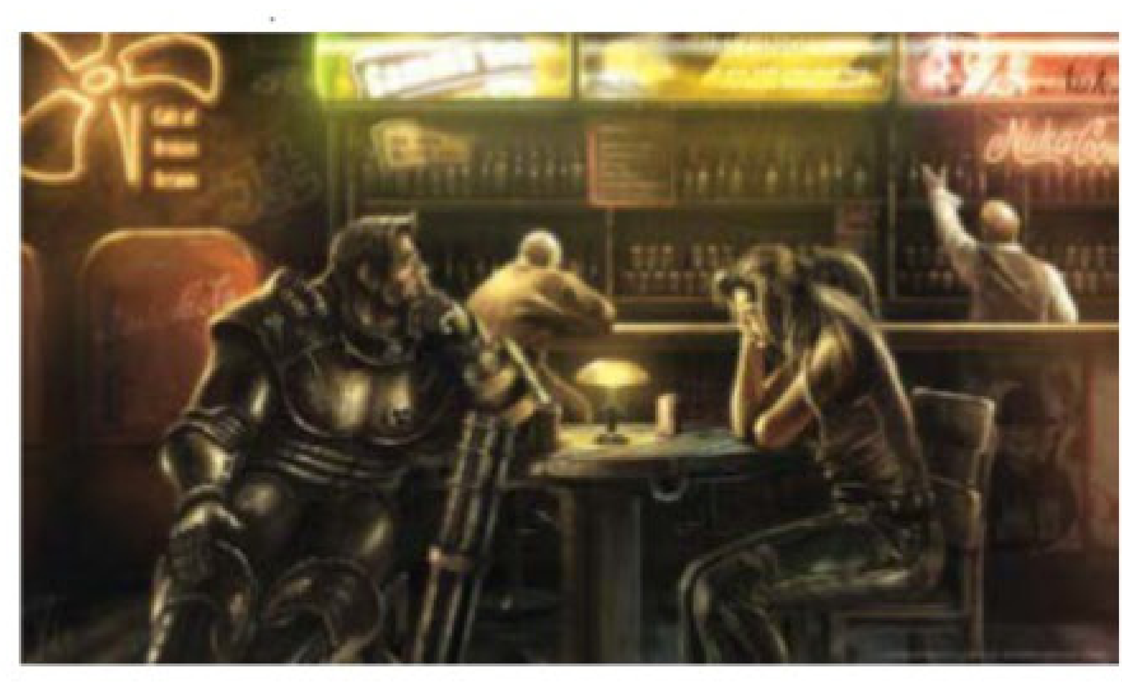
The Pitch

THROWN INTO the unforgiving corruption of 1936 Shanghai, Team Bondi's LA Noire follow-up is another third-person action game wherein players keep the peace and question the morality of dubious ne'er do wells by punching them in the face a whole lot.

Where Is It?

THE GAME has reportedly struggled at several junctures – the most notable being the studio's financial troubles. However, the acquisition of Team Bondi by Kennedy Miller Mitchell in 2013 has seemingly kick started development and secured a publisher in Warner Bros. Interactive. Footage that leaked last year at least confirms that the game exists – but whether its new owners see it as a valuable product is another matter entirely.

Status: **Critical**



Fallout Online

Developer: **Interplay Entertainment**
Announced: **2010**

The Pitch

A MASSIVE-MULTIPLAYER online game set in the post-apocalyptic wasteland of the *Fallout* universe. Players could travel across the radiated world in search of supplies and sanctuary, interacting with other players looking to survive.

Where Is It?

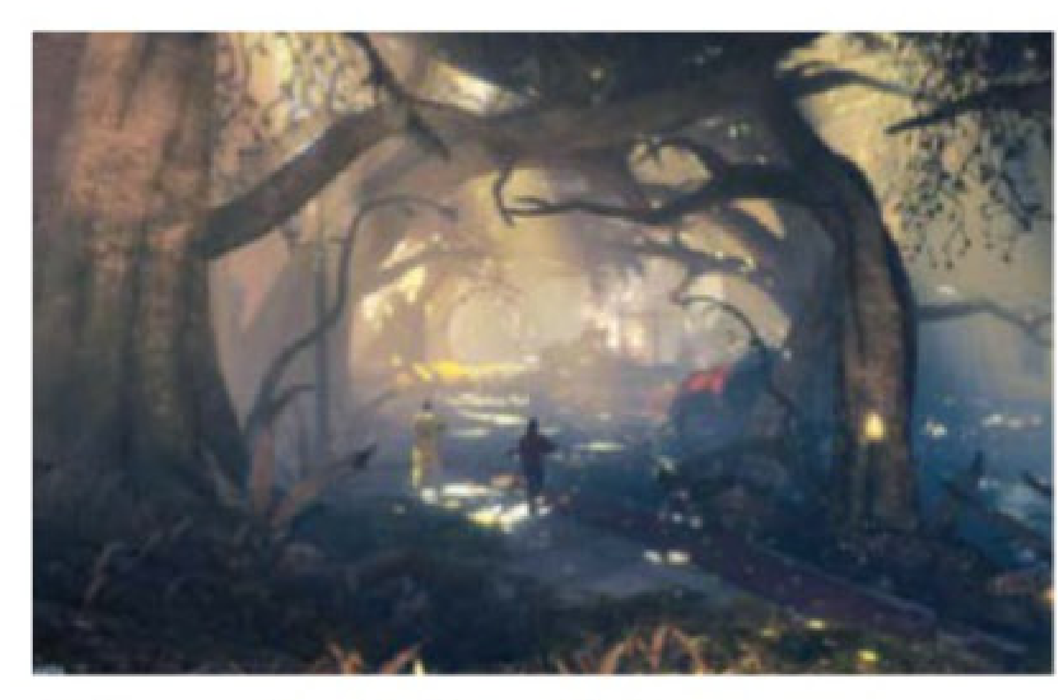
DUE TO a lengthy legal battle, Interplay Entertainment had to cease development on the game, with the rights rescinding back to Bethesda. Interplay is reported to still be working on the project, while rumour persists that Bethesda is working on its own Fallout MMO. The likelihood is that it'll emerge one day, but the *Fallout Online* that was announced will only emerge as its own original product.

Status: **Comatose**



Doom 4

Developer: **id Software** Announced **2008**



The Pitch

■ WHEN YOU'VE got a weapon affectionately named Big F**king Gun, there's not exactly much subtlety to go around. The concept is so simple that only Hollywood could get it wrong: head into space, find some aliens and blow their damn heads off.

Where Is It?

■ AFTER DEVELOPMENT was restarted several times around, a light has pierced through at the end of the tunnel. Having gone back to the drawing board in the last couple of years, *Doom 4* has been rebranded just *Doom*, with a beta open for those who pre-ordered *Wolfenstein: The New Order*. New features include melee combat, finishing moves and the ability to rip off an enemy's arm and use it to access new areas (and presumably club people with). Oh, *Doom*, never change.

Status: **Active**

Earth No More

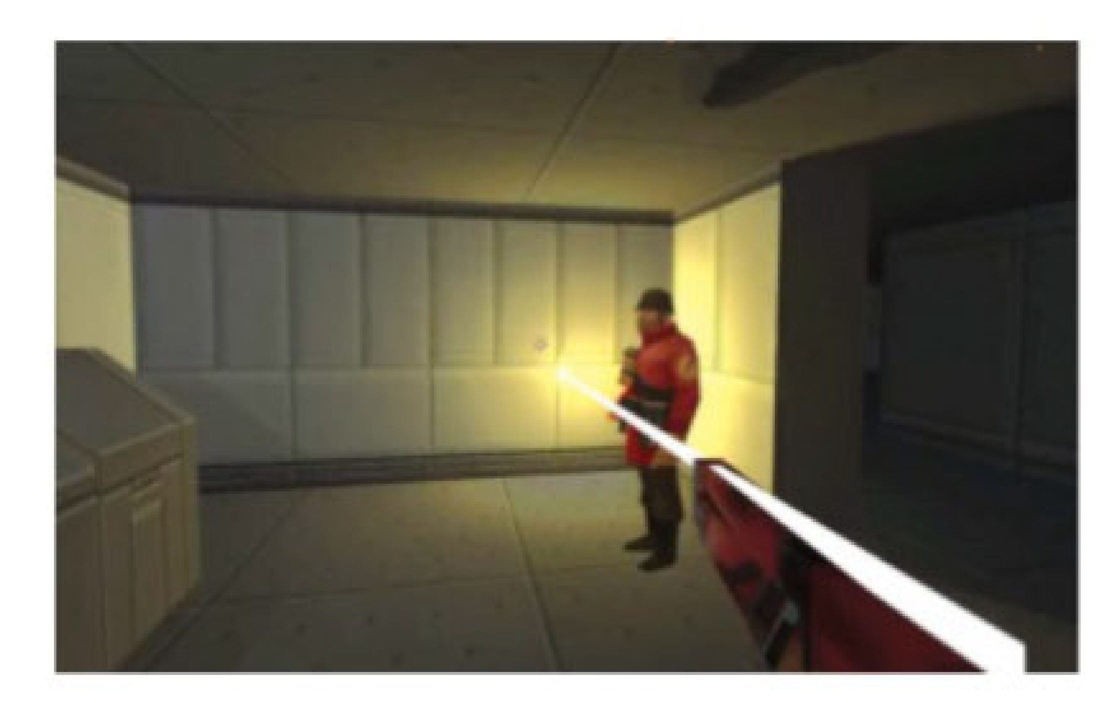
Developer: **Recoil Games/3D Realms**
Announced: **2012**

The Pitch

■ A FIRST-PERSON shooter set within the quarantined zone of a New England town following the outbreak of poisonous red vines. Teaming up with four other survivors, the protagonist must fight to reclaim his home from the infestation.

Where Is It?

■ FOLLOWING LEGAL and financial troubles, the project looked all but doomed a few years back. But, as is tradition with 3D Realms, a good project refuses to stay dead at the company. Using crowd funding in 2012, the project was said to be back on track and 3D Realms founder Scott Miller assured – adding that George Broussard (who worked on *Duke Nukem Forever*) would not be involved – that the company would avoid the mistakes of its past.
Status: **Critical**



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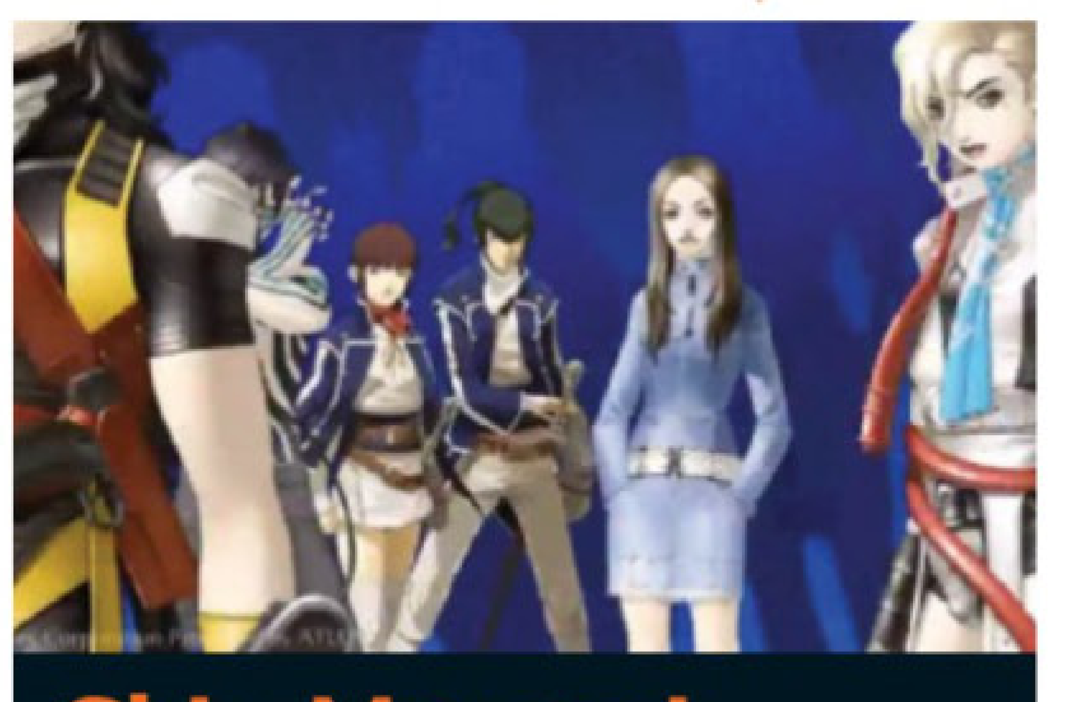
Developer: **Mojang** Announced: **2012**

The Pitch

■ A SCI-FI game set in the year AD 281,474,976,712,64 after people start waking up from a deep sleep. Gameplay features include engineering, space battles, mining and trading, FPS combat and an open universe featuring single and multiplayer modes. On top of that, an emulated 16-bit processor can be accessed throughout.

Where Is It?

■ MARKUS 'NOTCH' Persson has indefinitely shelved the project, but states that if other members of Mojang would be interested in continuing its production it could go back into development. However, Notch's fans are an impatient bunch: Mojang's community has been working on picking up where Notch left off.
Status: **Critical**



Shin Megami Tensei X Fire Emblem

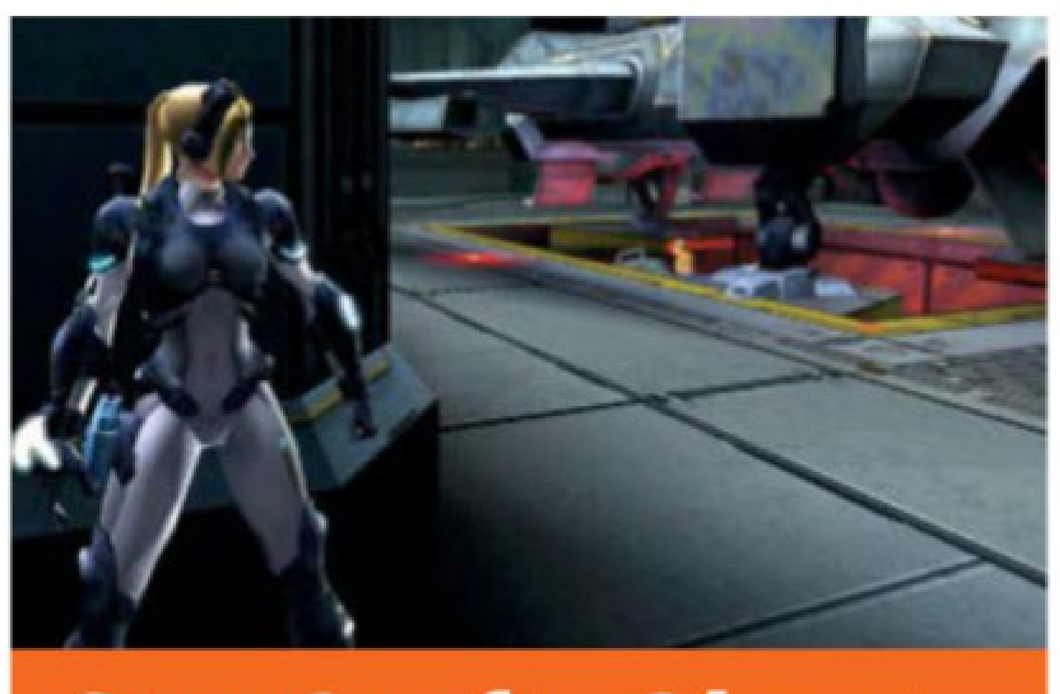
Developer: **Atlus/Intelligent Systems**
Announced: **2013**

The Pitch

■ TWO OF the biggest Japanese role-playing games unite in a crossover title that's sure to send all weeaboos in the vicinity into a frenzy.

Where Is It?

■ LITTLE HAS been seen and even less has been said of Shin Megami Tensei X Fire Emblem. Producer Hitoshi Yamagami has stated that the Wii U crossover has not been cancelled, with a major update due.
Status: **Active**



StarCraft: Ghost

Developer: **Activision Blizzard**
Announced: **2002**

The Pitch

■ WITH OVER a decade stuck in development hell, *StarCraft: Ghost* has the unfortunate honour of having the longest development of all the titles featured in this list. A spin-off of the popular real-time strategy title, *Ghosts* as a concept revolves around stealth gameplay augmented by a series of abilities granted by futuristic technology.

Where Is It?

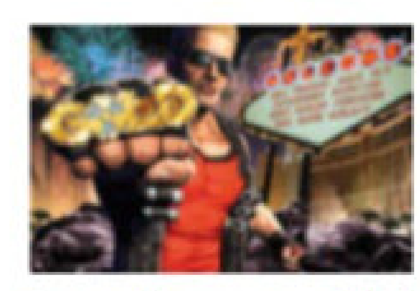
■ REFERENCED IN both *StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty* and *Heart of the Swarm*, for Nova, it's a case of always the bridesmaid never the ass-kicking bride.
Status: **Comatose**

5 GAMES THAT SURVIVED DEVELOPMENT HELL

Whether bona-fide successes or cataclysmic disappointments, these are the rare few that emerged from the darkness

DUKE NUKEM FOREVER

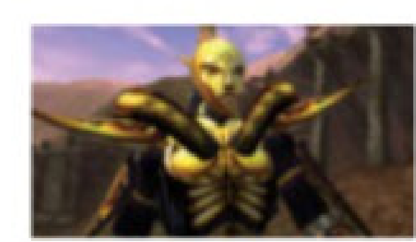
Limbo: 1996-2011



■ It went through several major design changes and various developers, and, as you would expect, the final product bared the scars. It felt stitched together; chapters developed several years apart and were crudely grafted together. Unsurprisingly, it didn't receive the royal welcome the King had hoped for.

THE ELDER SCROLLS III: MORROWIND

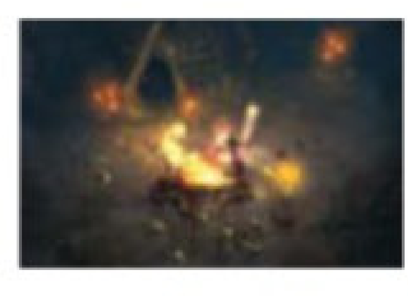
Limbo: 1996-2002



■ Bethesda claimed that it had sunk "close to 100 man-years" of development into the game by the time it was finally released. The elongated production was due to the technical limitations preventing the studio from realising its ambitious design concepts for the RPG.

DIABLO III

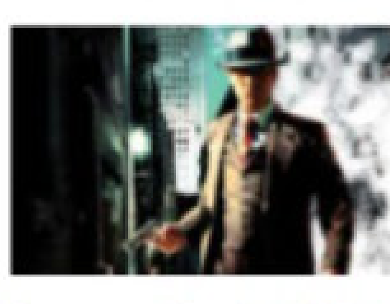
Limbo: 2008-2012



■ Beginning production when Blizzard North was still in operation, the game consistently failed to meet expectations and was eventually dramatically overhauled with a new team. The long wait did little to extinguish the fan base's passion and by no small miracle *Diablo III* was released to record-breaking sales.

LA NOIRE

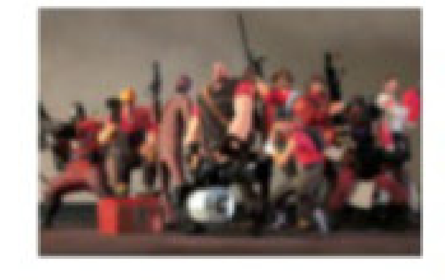
Limbo: 2004-2011



■ Team Bondi's *LA Noire* had the lofty ambition to bring live-action quality acting into the virtual domain. With its face-replicating MotionScan tech, Team Bondi hoped to set new standards. For the most part it succeeded but *LA Noire*'s shortcomings were found in other areas of its monotonous design.

TEAM FORTRESS 2

Limbo: 1998-2007



■ Valve works on Valve Time. Translated: they have enough money and saintly wisdom to only release a game when they feel like it. But while *Half-Life 3* is creeping up on it, *Team Fortress 2* currently holds the record for Valve's most delayed title. A major visual redesign is partly to blame.

HOW DELAYED WILL YOUR GAME BE?

GAME ANNOUNCEMENT → DO YOU HAVE ANY MONEY?

- DO YOU HAVE ANY MONEY? — YES → IS IT A MAJOR TRIPLE-A ANNUAL SEQUEL?; NO → HAVE YOU TRIED CROWD FUNDING?; WE'RE VALVE → DO YOU HAVE A FUNCTIONING STUDIO?
- IS IT A MAJOR TRIPLE-A ANNUAL SEQUEL? — YES → ON TIME; NO → IS THIS IDEA COMMERCIAL?
- HAVE YOU TRIED CROWD FUNDING? — YES → DID IT WORK?; NO → ARE YOU AN INDUSTRY VETERAN?
- DID IT WORK? — YES → DO YOU HAVE A FUNCTIONING STUDIO?; NO → ARE YOU AN INDUSTRY VETERAN?
- IS THIS IDEA COMMERCIAL? — NO → ARE YOU INDIE?; YES → ARE YOU PREPARED TO RELINQUISH CREATIVE INTEGRITY?
- DO YOU HAVE A FUNCTIONING STUDIO? — YES → IS THIS IDEA COMMERCIAL?; NO → ARE YOU A TEAM OF ONE OR TWO?; WE'RE VALVE → DO YOU ANTICIPATE DELAYS?
- ARE YOU AN INDUSTRY VETERAN? — YES → HAVE YOU TRIED CROWD FUNDING?; NO → ARE YOU A TEAM OF ONE OR TWO?
- ARE YOU INDIE? — NO → ARE YOU PREPARED TO RELINQUISH CREATIVE INTEGRITY?; YES → IS THIS YOUR FIRST GAME?
- ARE YOU PREPARED TO RELINQUISH CREATIVE INTEGRITY? — YES → ON TIME; NO → IS THIS YOUR FIRST GAME?
- DO YOU ANTICIPATE DELAYS? — NO → DELAYED 1-6 MONTHS; YES → DELAYED 1-2 YEARS; WE'RE VALVE → WHENEVER YOU F**KING FEEL LIKE
- ARE YOU A TEAM OF ONE OR TWO? — YES → HAVE YOU WORKED ON A RETAIL RELEASE BEFORE?; NO → DELAYED INDEFINITELY
- IS THIS YOUR FIRST GAME? — YES → DO YOU ANTICIPATE DELAYS?; NO → DELAYED 1-6 MONTHS
- HAVE YOU WORKED ON A RETAIL RELEASE BEFORE? — YES → DELAYED 1-2 YEARS; NO → DELAYED INDEFINITELY

ON TIME | DELAYED 1-6 MONTHS | WHENEVER YOU F**KING FEEL LIKE | DELAYED 1-2 YEARS | DELAYED INDEFINITELY

WHEN YOUR GAME WILL BE RELEASED

THE HISTORY MAKERS

With two new Assassin's Creed releases on the horizon, **games™** speaks to those involved in creating history-inspired games

Maxime Durand, Ubisoft

Maxime Durand, production coordinator and historical researcher for the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, lives and breathes history. "As a youth I really liked games like *Versailles 1685* made by Cryo, because you could feel the intense immersion on all aspects and be part of a fictive plot," he begins. "You can see different perspectives to mankind and understand each era is complex and filled with diverse people and mentality. *Assassin's Creed Unity* is really about the story of Arno, his relationship with Elise and his redemption quest, epitomised by his journey from novice to master assassin. The French Revolution acts as a backdrop to Arno's story. Consequently, we'll be crossing paths with numerous and very diverse historical figures, landmarks and events. *Unity* is respectful to historical facts and intentions regarding these, while integrating them to our own unique narrative arc."


Al Bickham, Creative Assembly

Assassin's Creed is known – and occasionally derided – for its willingness to twist real historical events to fit its own agenda. This is no more apparent than during its much-maligned modern-day sections that play out in tandem to historical events, such as the Third Crusade or the American war for independence. Balancing history and narrative freedom is, by all accounts, an unenviable task. There's so much potential for factual inaccuracy, insensitivity or plain idiocy that only a strong creative team should ever attempt it if it hopes to succeed. Some become so bamboozled by the long-winded, technical research processes that go into making historical games that they change things completely, with utter disregard for what really happened.

I don't want to create clichéd bullshit about dark ages and dirty violent people

Daniel Vávra, however, isn't a fan of narrative compromise. "I don't want to create clichéd bullshit about dark ages, dirty violent people and knights that are not even able to walk in plate armour. The period was very different to what we see in most movies." He is of course referring to the Middle Ages – the early 15th Century in particular. Vávra's studio, Warhorse, is currently working away in the Czech Republic on the Kickstarter-funded RPG *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, which promises to adhere closely to real life and not acquiesce to more whimsical ideas about the era.

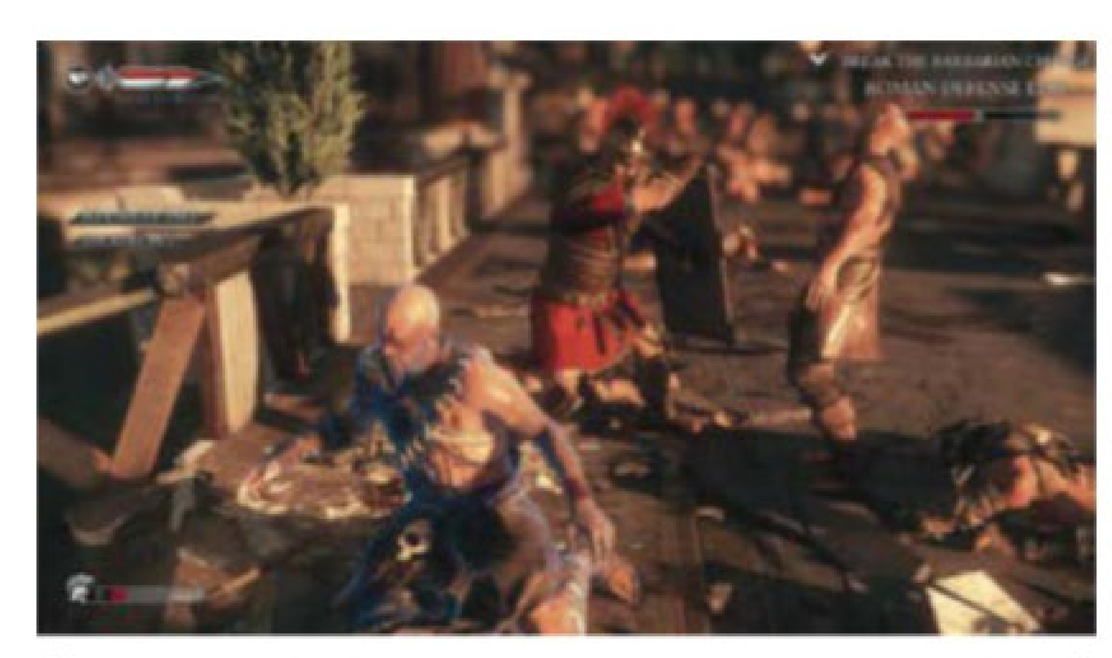

Daniel Vávra, Warhorse Studios

With no fewer than two new instalments of Ubisoft's mammoth *Assassin's Creed* franchise – *Unity* and *Rogue* – due before the end of the year, games with real historical settings are arguably more in vogue now than



they ever have been, but Vávra and Warhorse's vision stands alone as being committed to representing history in a decidedly no-frills manner. "It's one of the most interesting periods of our history and history of the Europe, which is sadly not very known outside our country, since we were behind the iron curtain for years so nobody was able to tell this story to the world. I always wanted to bring this all back in all its glory – to create a virtual time machine, which will let everyone visit this long-gone world.

"You can't just write what comes to your mind. You need to do a lot of research before you start and during writing. Every detail that you know about the present world, or which you could just made up in fantasy world, is a big unknown. Of course it depends how deep you want to go. Many filmmakers don't care about details, but we would like to do something that brings back the past accurately and vividly."



■ *Son Of Rome* tells the story of Marius, a fictional general that becomes embroiled in a barbarian siege.

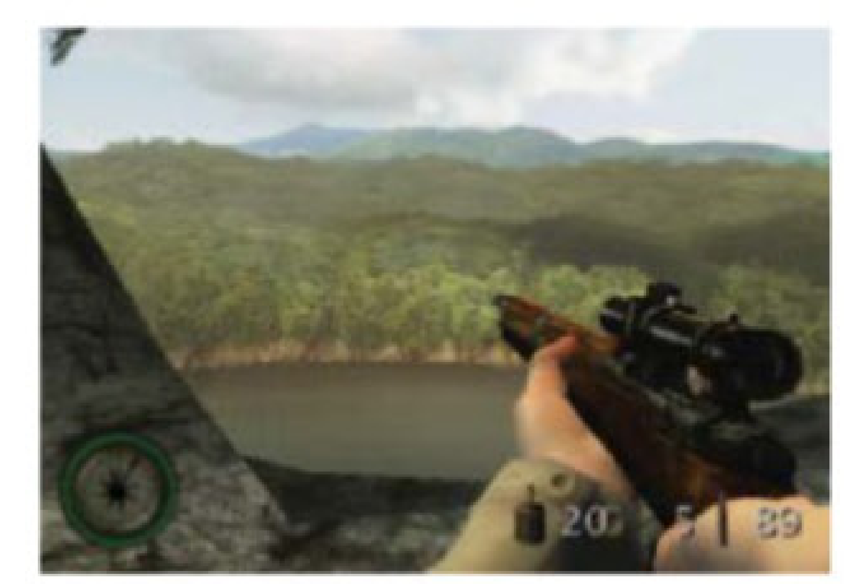
You can't just write what comes to your mind. You need to do a lot of research

Setting games during real historical periods isn't just a burgeoning trend, however. Ever since the early days of the industry, developers have found great inspiration tucked away in civilisation's rich backstory, from flight sim *Spitfire Ace* that appeared on all the major home computers of the early Eighties and *Sid Meier's Pirates!* later in the decade through to more modern efforts such as the *Dynasty Warriors* and *Assassin's Creed* series, as well as a wealth of World War Two-based *Call Of Duty* titles. What is clear, though, is that developers take pride in researching their games properly, either on-team or through outside consultancy. Dan Ward – an author and consultant whose latest book, *A Tomb Called Iwo Jima*, tackles a similar topic to the game – worked with EA on *Medal Of Honor: Rising Sun.*

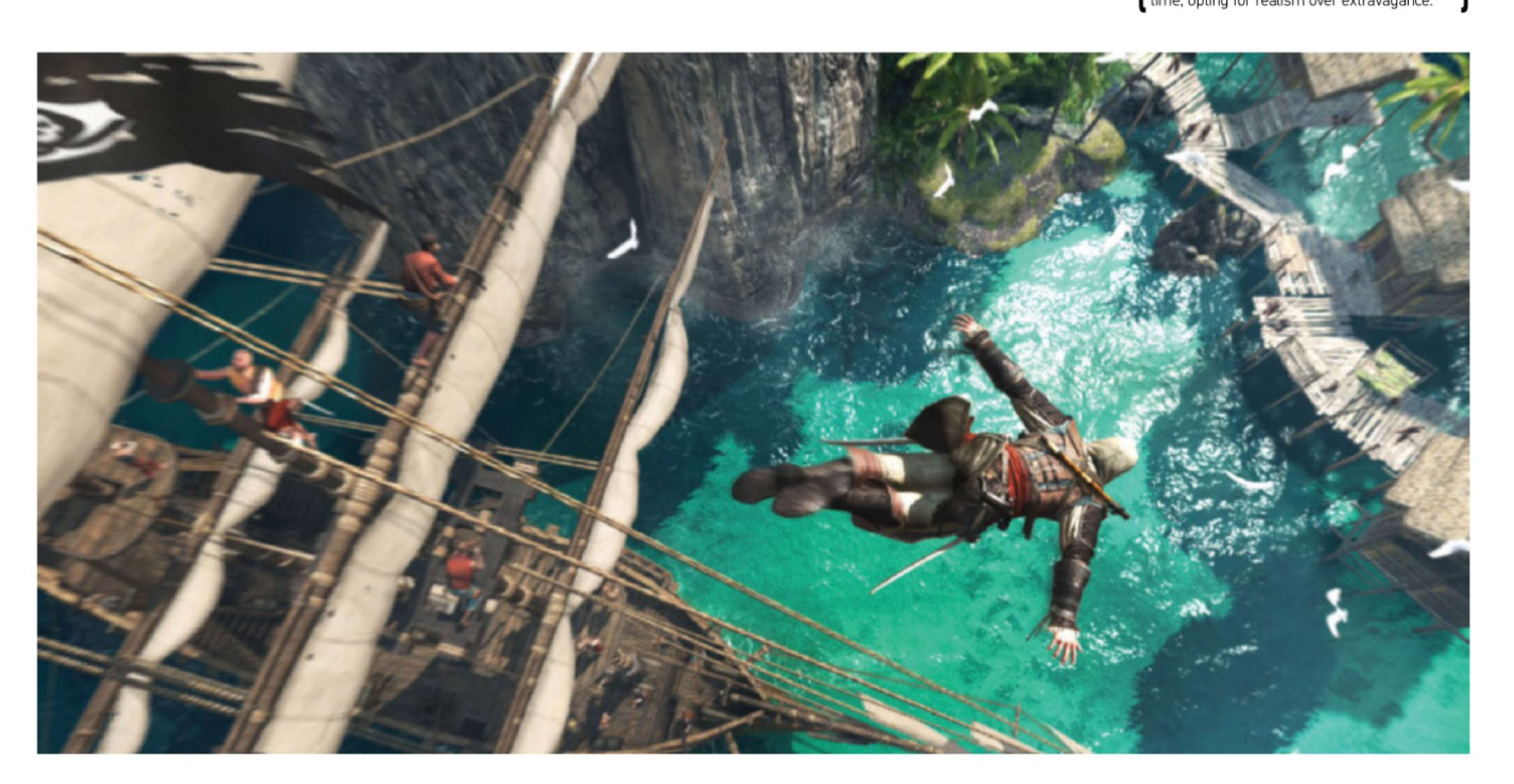
"While visiting the Planes of Fame Air Museum in Chino, California, I noticed two men making a professional recording of the museum's Type-52 Zero fighter's original Sakae engine," he tells us. "It turned out they were looking for someone to help with the Japanese military aspect of a new EA game so asked me to come to their office to meet their team. The EA team was dedicated to making the game as fun and as realistic as technology, budget and time would permit. I was happy with the level of sincere respect towards both the Axis and Allied Nations. When there were questions, the team deferred to those who were hired to provide advice regarding the historical aspect of the game."

Maxime Durand is keen to elaborate on how the *Assassin's Creed* team treats the planning process. "The historical research process actually follows the narrative lead for our many *Assassin's Creed* games. We research at the same time a setting is decided and a theme is developed from scratch in the conception phase. The core team usually gets to read a lot about the era or they sometimes have the chance to [visit] the specific locations. Then we go from very large ideas of a time or era and try to narrow down to understand what is really important for each setting.

"That's how you get the idea that the American revolution really needed a naval or frontier aspect, or that the French Revolution is more about an urban »



■ The *Medal Of Honor* series has been championing historical accuracy for a long time, opting for realism over extravagance.



THE CENTURION

Peter Gornstein, director of cinematics, Ryse: Son Of Rome



Though historians were consulted, Gornstein and co wanted to focus on the element of fun.

Was it a priority to ensure you properly understood the historical period that *Ryse* was based on?
I'll put it like this, it was definitely a priority for us to understand the period that it was taking place in. It was not *so* important for us that the game was historically accurate – obviously it's not historically accurate – but it was important to us that it was historically believable. Everything that happens in the game is related to stuff that happened in real life; of course we're mixing up the time periods and the Emperors and basically condensing what happens in Marius's life.

To what extent did you defer to the research of the history experts?
We had a bunch of experts and consultants and worked very closely with them. We basically had sword experts and gladiator guys come in – they were actually people that, strangely enough, make a living teaching other people to live like gladiators and get involved in their diet and fighting techniques. We had these people in a number of times to sort of show us the various strategies that you use with the swords and the shield and the various fighting formations. We also went on several trips to Rome and had some tours specially organised by the Italian government to various places that the public can't go. It was a lot of fun – [we heard] some very disturbing facts about what it was like fighting in the olden days, I can tell you that! [laughs]

When creating a historical game, do you feel that accuracy takes precedence, or is creativity the most important thing?
I think creativity is the most important thing. We're not trying to pretend that it's a history lesson. For us we would push historical accuracy as far we could but it was also important for us that the visual idea of *Ryse* was different from any other Roman games. So we didn't just try to, for instance, duplicate the uniforms or the lore [directly] – we took it as inspiration.

So historical accuracy was important as long as it served the fun. As soon as it [got] in the way we'd have to sort of deviate from it. The most important thing is that the player has a good experience and that they get something other than the normal Roman experience. [Realism] is one way that you can go, but we decided that the market was so saturated with Roman games and IPs already that if we just made something that was historically accurate it would be very difficult for people to immediately recognise it as *Ryse* – as a unique IP – so we ventured away from that.

» Our primary goal is to entertain… History is fun by itself

playground. That's usually when we find our main historical villain; someone that can have many unique traits; such as dying at the most relevant historical moment for our game timeline…" Just by employing temporary historical consultants for a particular game, developers and publishers cover their own backs to a certain extent when it comes down to matters of plausibility and authenticity. Even if a narrative focus dwells lightyears away from what really happened during a particular time period, it could be argued that writers and producers have something of a duty to at least acknowledge the real history that they are borrowing from. Dan Ward agrees, but with something of a caveat.

"It would be great if videogame developers, if they chose to do a product based on actual events, portrayed the game accurately – I think it is in their best interest to do so. But any game needs to be first and foremost fun to play." This is, of course, a key area for discussion. Ward is right, after all – what use is any game if it isn't, first and foremost, fun to interact with? This is something that Durand empathises with.



"Our primary goal is to entertain. It always feels to me that history is fun by itself (having graduated in History it's obvious to me), but I guess grades in high school from many students would prove me wrong. That's where *Assassin's Creed* can help. We hope players will learn something from their experience, but again this has to go through the engaging experience of stabbing Templars." His point is perhaps a little tongue-in-cheek, but salient nonetheless. The underlying difficulty in crafting any historical game is finding an appropriate balance between the accurate representation of events and creating something engaging for the player. Of course, history itself *is* inherently interesting to many people, but occasionally events need to be adapted to generate a fun experience. These original narratives come from a multitude of different places, whether rising from imaginative development personnel or from other, more tangible stimulus.



■ Although a strategy series, and one bereft of a traditional narrative, The Creative Assembly's *Total War* games allow the player to carve their own path through real history.

We read letters sent by soldiers to their families

"When we started to work on the project, we quickly realised that the First World War was more forgotten than the Second War," begins Hervé

Masseron, narrative designer and cutscene director of *Valiant Hearts*. "What interested us the most were the conditions and the progress of the war. When we started to read letters sent by soldiers to their families, we understood that this war was above all a story about people – a real dramatic tank. These letters were the starting point for our work and we tried to recover the emotion we felt the first time we read them.

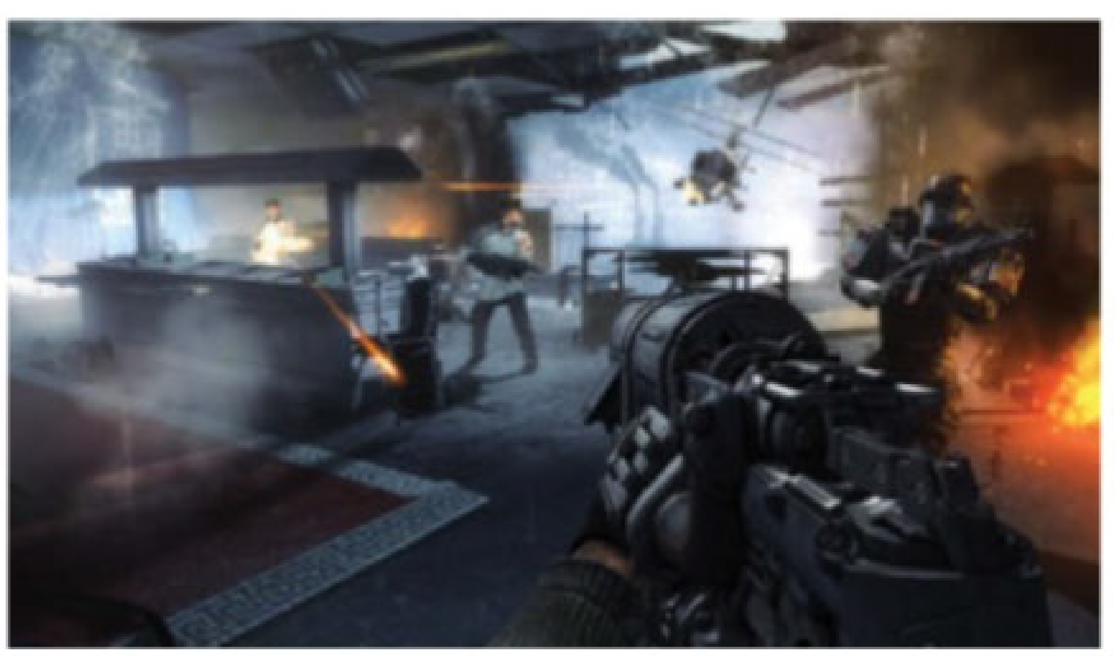
"This game is in some way a tribute to all who experienced this war and the occasion to make this period better known by everyone. Focusing our story more on human beings – the problems encountered by the characters on each camp – than the progress of the war itself allowed us to write our own story and insert in the history. That's why we decided to make the player play different characters; to make them go through this war via these crossed destinies – leaving our mark by bringing this sense of humanity to a moment in history often talked about as facts and figures."

It is common, though, for some developers to be not even slightly tempted by the allure of real life, preferring instead to throw out the history books and replace them with, some would argue, nonsense. We mean nonsense in an affectionate way of course – deviating from real history is often part and parcel of composing a coherent and engaging narrative. Most recently we have seen *Wolfenstein: The New Order* push the franchise's over-the-top imagining of the 20th Century to new levels, sending BJ Blazkowicz to the Moon (literally, not figuratively) during its final act. In *BioShock*'s alternate 20th Century, objectivist Andrew Ryan builds an underwater city named Rapture, purely to separate the elite from the tedium of regular society, pioneering some unbelievable technology in the process.

We wanted a sense of authenticity but we weren't trying to make a documentary

Building elaborate and imaginative worlds around real history is a strong device for developers to draw from, as history has its own, almost unbelievable tales to tell. Peter Gornstein, director of cinematics for Xbox One launch title *Ryse: Son Of Rome*, also believes that fun and creativity have to be at the forefront of any game development. "The balance is between fun and historical accuracy and of course when you're doing a game like *Ryse*, the fun always wins," he says, in earnest. "We wanted a sense of authenticity but we weren't trying to make a documentary, let's put it that way. But historical accuracy was definitely a huge foundation that we based the work on."

Ryse augments its grounding in Roman history by including elements of the supernatural, and this is a strong example of development team that, while extremely dedicated to the real history at work around its narrative, made a conscious decision to forego hardcore historical representation and »



■ *The New Order* went nuts with its depiction of a post-World War Two world in which the Nazis are dominant.

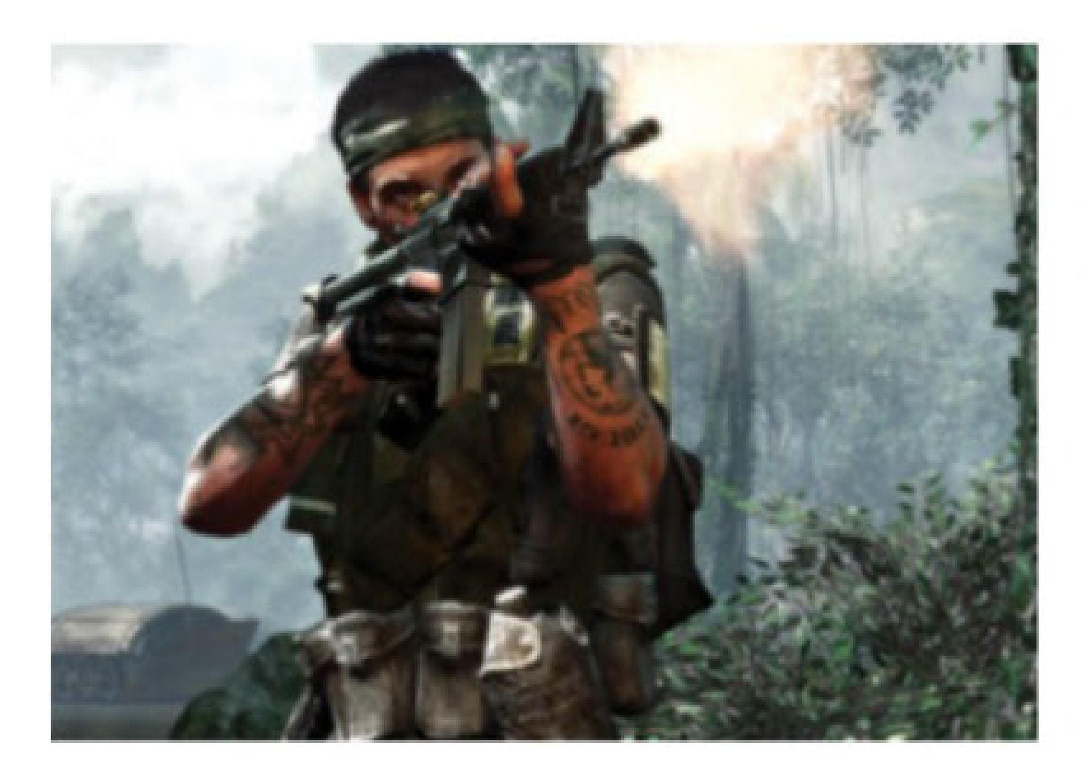


LOST IN TIME

Some fascinating periods of history that haven't made it in the marketplace

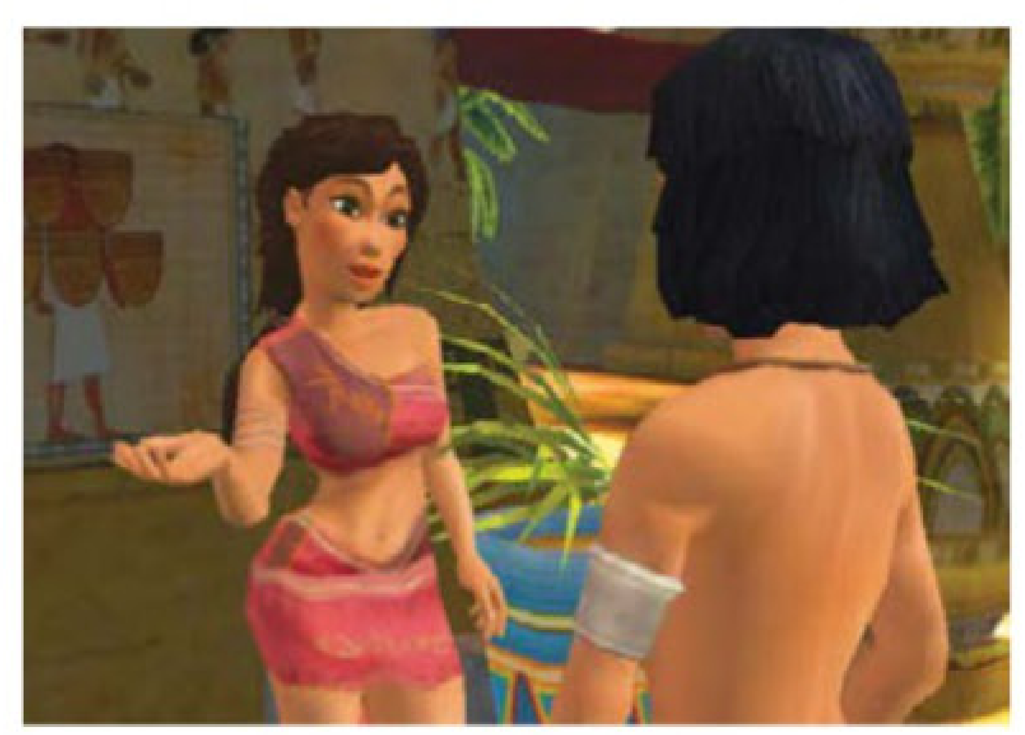
Vietnam War

■DESPITE APPEARING in *Call Of Duty: Black Ops* and having a PC-exclusive *Battlefield* game based on it, the Vietnam War hasn't been the basis of a triple-A game for a while, with smaller titles like *Conflict: Vietnam* not really hitting the mark. The war itself lasted for nearly 20 years, and so there is a wealth of tales that could be drawn from to create a dedicated experience. As for gameplay, imagine the unsettling narrative focus of *Spec Ops: The Line* crossed with the jungle-based subterfuge of *Metal Gear Solid 3* and you get the idea…



Ancient Egypt

■DESPITE THE multitude of intrepid adventurers that have raided Egyptian tombs – Lara Croft, Sir Arthur Pendragon, Indiana Jones – not many games aside from the *Ankh* franchise and Pharoah have actually been set amongst the ancient civilisations of Egypt. There's obviously a long period of time that encompasses the term 'Ancient Egypt', but it would be particularly fascinating to explore Egypt's relationship with the Roman Republic, or the French occupation of the late 18th Century and the rise of viceroy Muhammad Ali a few years later.



Russian Revolution

■OTHER THAN a couple of strategy efforts such as *Revolution Under Siege* on PC, this tumultuous and essential period of modern history hasn't really been touched in the games industry. With *Assassin's Creed Unity* on the way in October, Ubisoft is tackling the French Revolution of the late 18th Century – a company with similar resources and ambition could do amazing work with the Bolshevik uprising, the Russian involvement in the First World War or the brutal civil war that engulfed the country following Lenin's rise to prominence.



instead inject a dose of the unfamiliar. But the real difficulty in creating an original narrative under these circumstances lies in one category: does historical accuracy take precedence, or is creativity the most important thing?

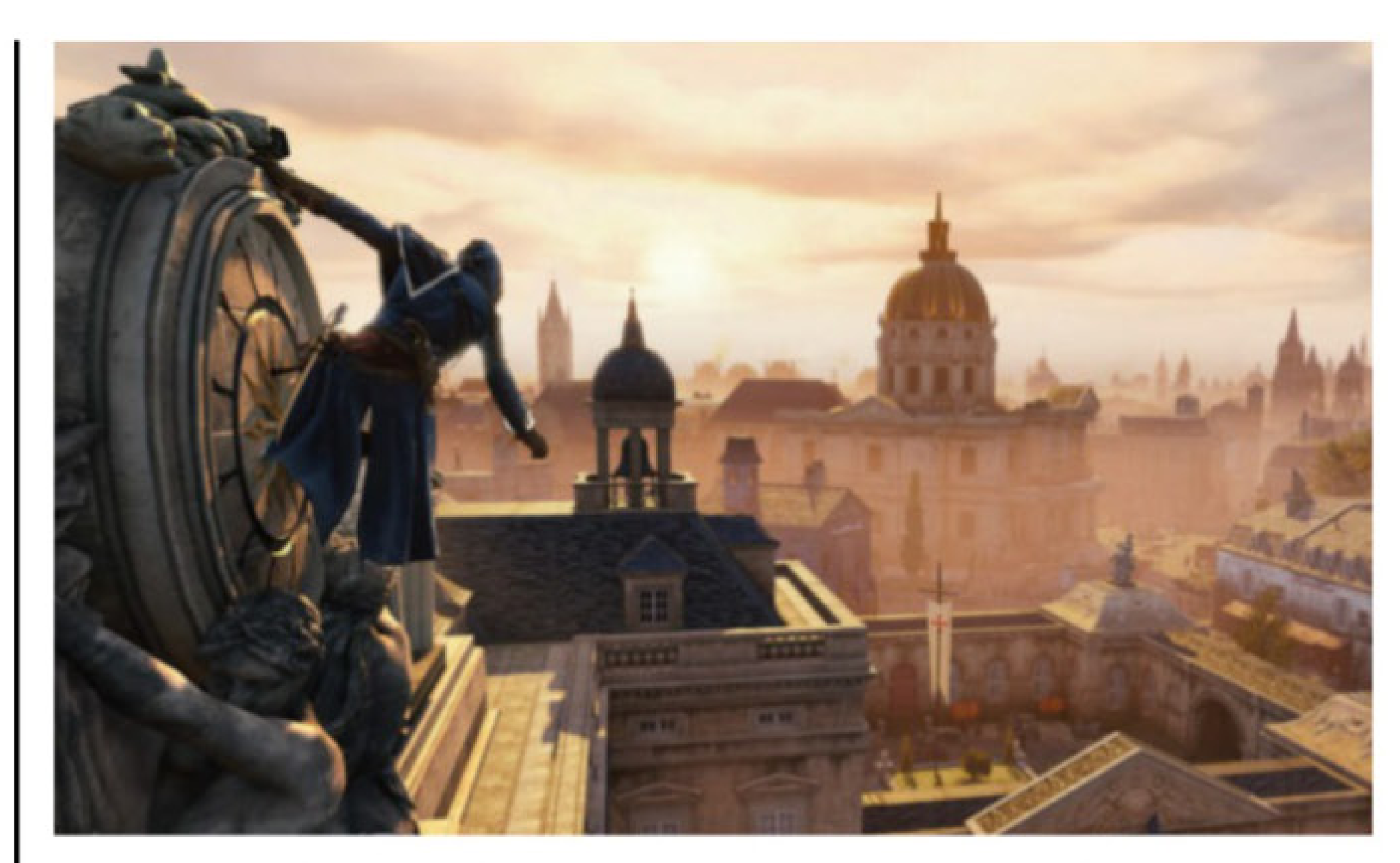
Daniel Vávra is quick to answer, "I don't think that interesting narrative and historical accuracy are against each other. Of course that there are some moments when we choose the more dramatic situations or where we compress time or events a little bit to tell a more interesting story, but I don't share the idea of many screenwriters that story is most important and everything else is second. Perfect examples are Ridley Scott's *Kingdom Of Heaven* or *Robin Hood* movies which are neither good stories or historically accurate, while if he stuck to what really happened, he would probably get much better stories without sacrificing accuracy."



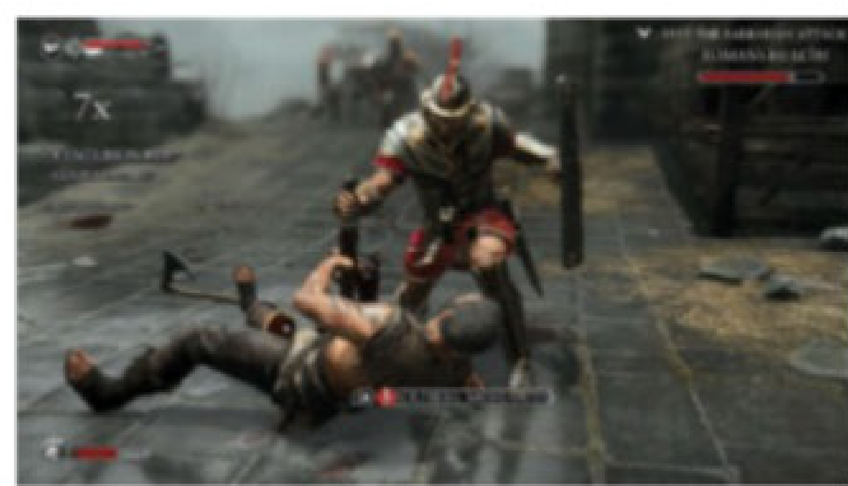
■ Warhorse is putting a lot of time into recreating everything of the time from the ground up. Literally, that is – Daniel Vávra loves the architecture of the period.

As soon as you put the player in control, history starts to get rewritten

Interestingly, it seems that some developers are actually more keen for players to carve out their own narrative from a historical palette, and not just in an RPG sense. The Creative Assembly's Al Bickham is of this opinion. "That's really what it's all about. I think you'd be hard-pressed to find a *Total War* player that hasn't achieved amazing feats of their own making where they've surprised even themselves. *Total War* games are the perfect 'What if…?' simulators. With all things *Total War*, our overarching aim is historical authenticity: to provide a game experience that is authentic to the time period, and gives you a strong flavour of the era.



"There are certain things we can confidently be accurate with – the geopolitical disposition of the various factions in the year the game begins, for example, or the particular style of helmet that a specific warrior wore – and these facts are diligently researched by our designers and artists. However, the game is an entirely nonlinear experience; it's a sandbox strategy game. As soon as you put the player in control, history starts to get rewritten."

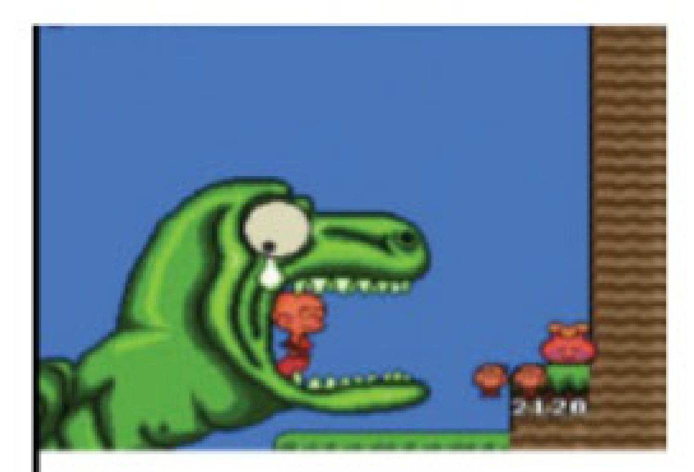


■ *Ryse* manages to achieve authenticity through its production design – costumes and weaponry are particular highlights.



ANOTHER WORLD

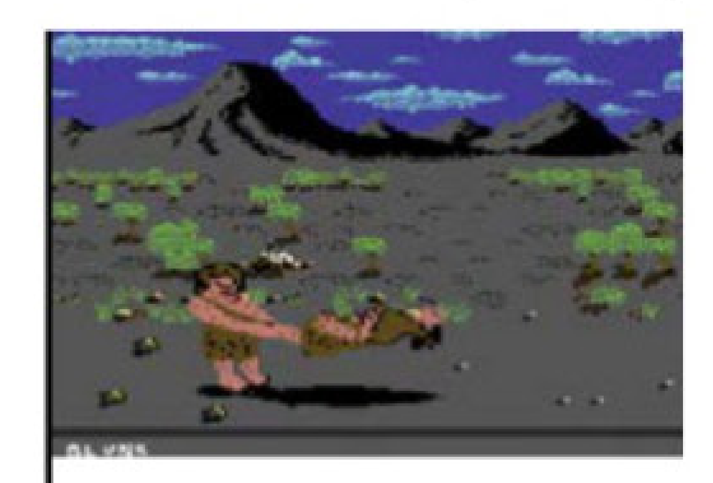
We investigate Earth's alternate past and future, according to videogames



Bonk's Adventure

■ In trying to stop King Drool, Bonk mercilessly headbutts the dinosaurs into extinction, ending the Cretaceous period in the process.

66,000,000 BCE



Caveman Ugh-Lympics

■ Professional sport is invented by the Neanderthals. In its primitive initial form, the noble spirit of the Olympic games mostly involves throwing other people.

200,000 BCE



Spartan: Total Warrior

■ An unnamed soldier gets into a bit of a scrap with a number of Greek gods during the Roman march on Greece. His actions result in the suicide of Emperor Tiberius.

37 CE



Ryse: Son Of Rome

■ Roman general Marius Titus is tasked with defending Rome from barbarians, killing barbarian leader Boudica and causing Emperor Nero's death in the process.

68 CE



Assassin's Creed

■ A parkour-savvy assassin named Altaïr uncovers a widespread plot by the Templars to destroy the world… or something. He gets his mitts on a 'Piece Of Eden'.

1191 CE



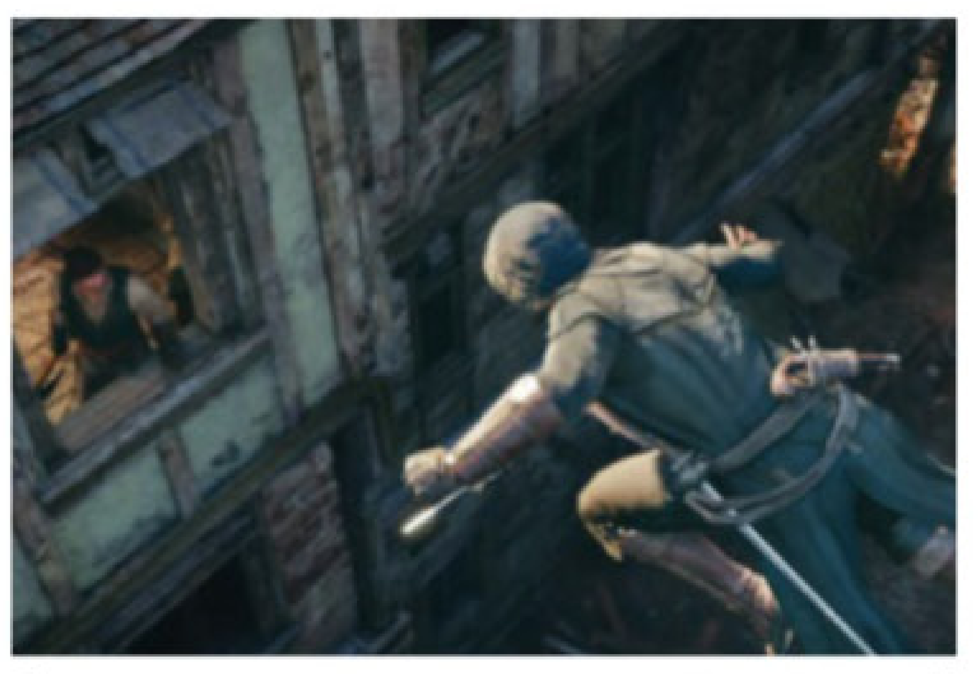


This is perhaps where we'll see historical games heading in the future as we all settle into the new generation. Developers have more resources than ever, and so although we'll see more time and effort being expended on accurate research and achieving authenticity, it's likely that we'll see more and more games stray from the historical path with dreams of originality, or allowing their players to rewrite history for themselves. All of the developers that we've been fortunate enough to speak to have their own ideas about building narrative around history, and it's abundantly clear that it's no easy task.



Assassin's Creed Unity looks set to push the historical trend even further, and represents an idea that has been on Ubisoft's mind for quite some time. Maxime Durand and his team have been hard at work to use history in even more interesting ways every year, and *Unity* is set to be at the pinnacle of history games when it launches at the end of October. "On *Assassin's Creed Unity*, the era was decided just after *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood* had been released," says Durand, "but it really took time to recreate this next-gen city on the biggest and most faithful scale so far. Obviously, even in this new era of consoles, we are not immune to technical limitations. Also, the precise information and location of every house in the Paris of 1789 no longer exists and consequently, we could not recreate all of them exactly as they were. However, we feel that our reproduction of Paris represents an accurate portrayal of the spirit of 18th Century Paris. The result is an impressive immersive experience built on a cinematic scale."

> **Even in this new era of consoles, we are not immune to technical limitations**



■ *Unity* promises a stunning level of fidelity in its recreation of 18th Century Paris. It'll be interesting to see just how large the city is.



■ We'd like to see some real disparity between the wealthy and poorer areas of Paris – after all, the revolution erupted because of it.

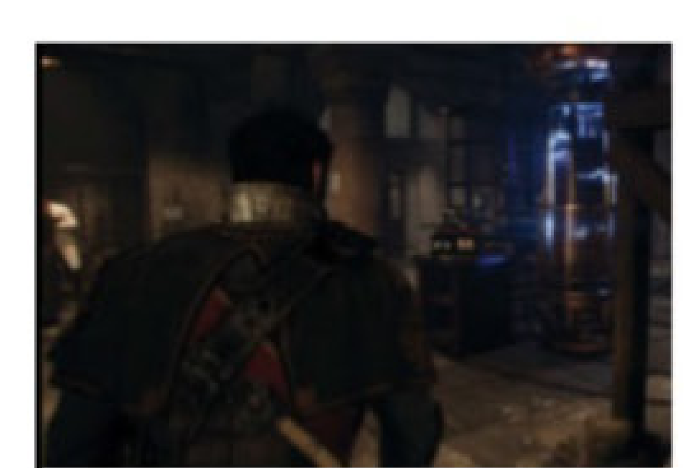


Assassin's Creed II

■ Ezio Auditore befriends Leonardo Da Vinci, who successfully invents air travel without batting an eyelid. Ezio gets Altaïr's Piece Of Eden and threatens the Pope.



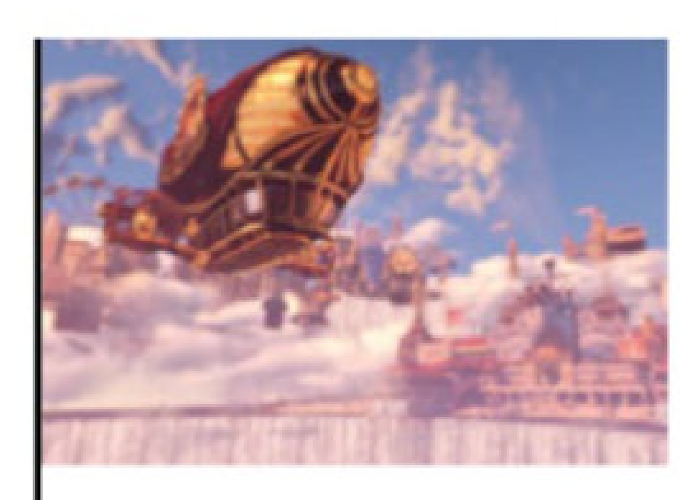
1499 CE



The Order: 1886

■ It turns out that the world has been at the mercy of hideous beasts this whole time, and so the Knights of the Round Table set out to stop them with Tesla weapons.

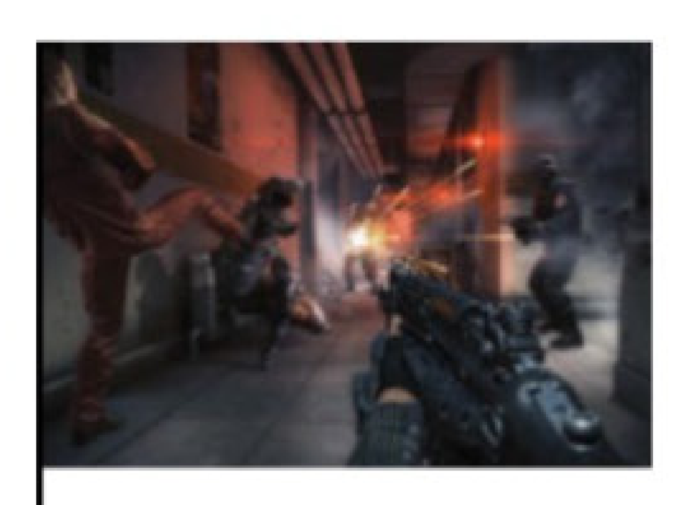
1886 CE



BioShock Infinite

■ Funded by Congress and pioneered by Zachary Comstock, the floating city of Columbia is launched, setting events in motion that result in war with the US.

1893 CE



Wolfenstein: The New Order

■ The USA surrenders during the Second World War, declaring the Nazis victorious. Meanwhile, the only man that can stop them is in a coma…

1948 CE



Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2

■ Led by a nutter named Makarov, ultranationalists seize control of Russia. Russia invades the USA, shortly after a pretty well-publicised airport massacre.

2016 CE



Tapan Kaikki 3

JOONAS TURNER, SOUND DESIGNER, NUCLEAR THRONE

"My favourite game ever, to this day, is a Finnish MS-DOS game – a top-down shooter somewhere between Hotline Miami *and* Nuclear Throne. *[TK3] was my favourite of all of them, and it was made in 1996, yet it included all these systems and mechanics – I think it had simple physics and stuff as well – but it's 1996… that's like 16 years before* Hotline *or* Throne, *and does that whole genre just as well. It had co-op, too, so you could play it with your friends. It was a game my parents didn't want me to play, and I think that's why I loved it [laughs]."*

19

Heavy launcher



"It was a game my parents didn't want me to play, and I think that's why I loved it"

JOONAS TURNER, SOUND DESIGNER, NUCLEAR THRONE

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Reviews



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HYRULE WARRIORS

Does the Dynasty Warriors/Zelda mash-up live up to the best of both worlds? games™ finds out



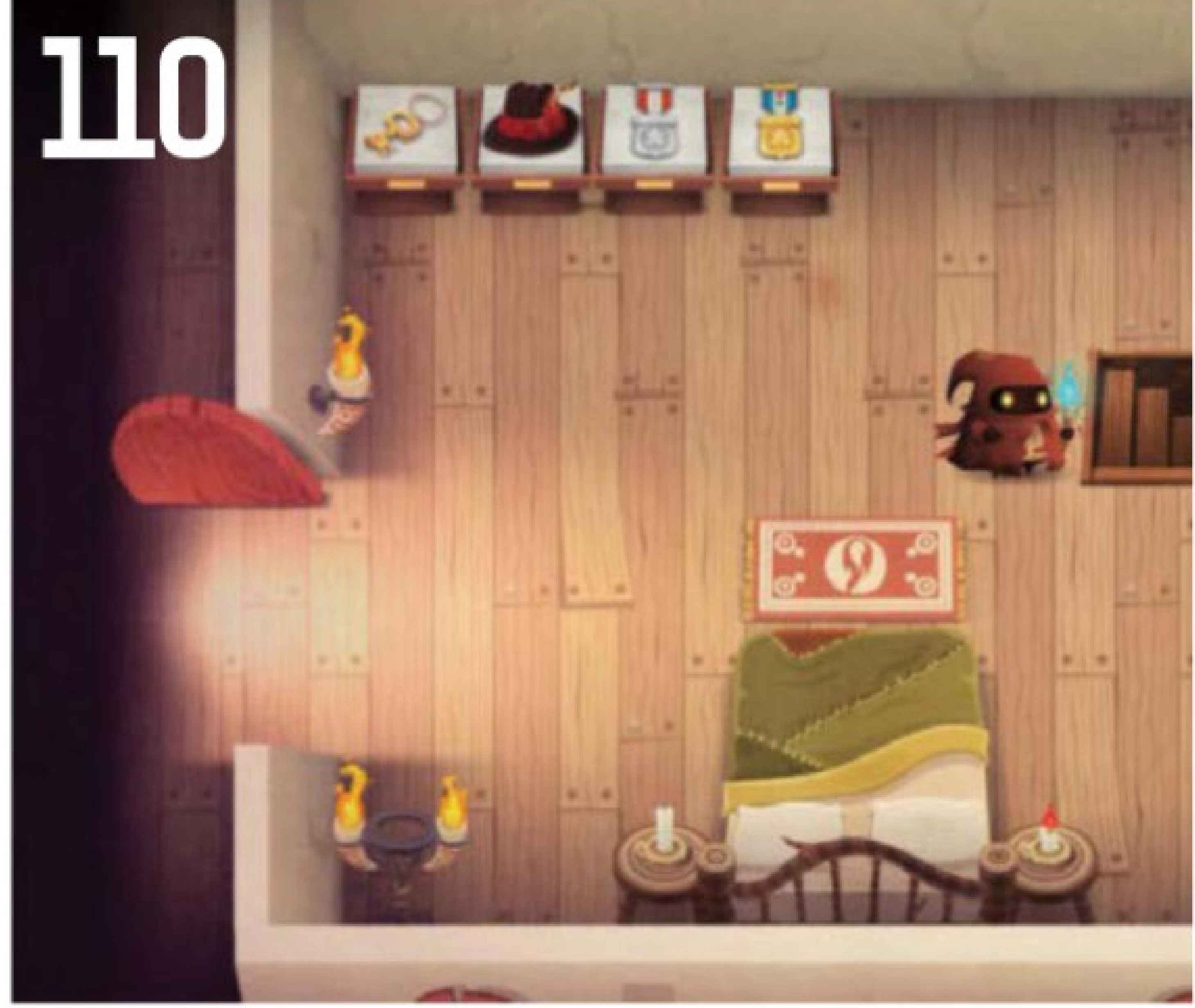
THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.













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MAKIN' RUPEE?

Hyrule Warriors

It seems like an uncomfortable fit at first, yet within ten minutes of starting *Hyrule Warriors* you'll wonder why you waited so long. The latest entry in one of gaming's most maligned and misunderstood series surely has the best chance yet of convincing the unconverted, though anyone expecting more than a *Warriors* game in a *Zelda* skin may be disappointed with the result. Nintendo has supplied the world and the characters, but the mechanics are the same ones Omega Force has been refining and iterating upon for over a decade – with a handful of Hylian flourishes, of course.

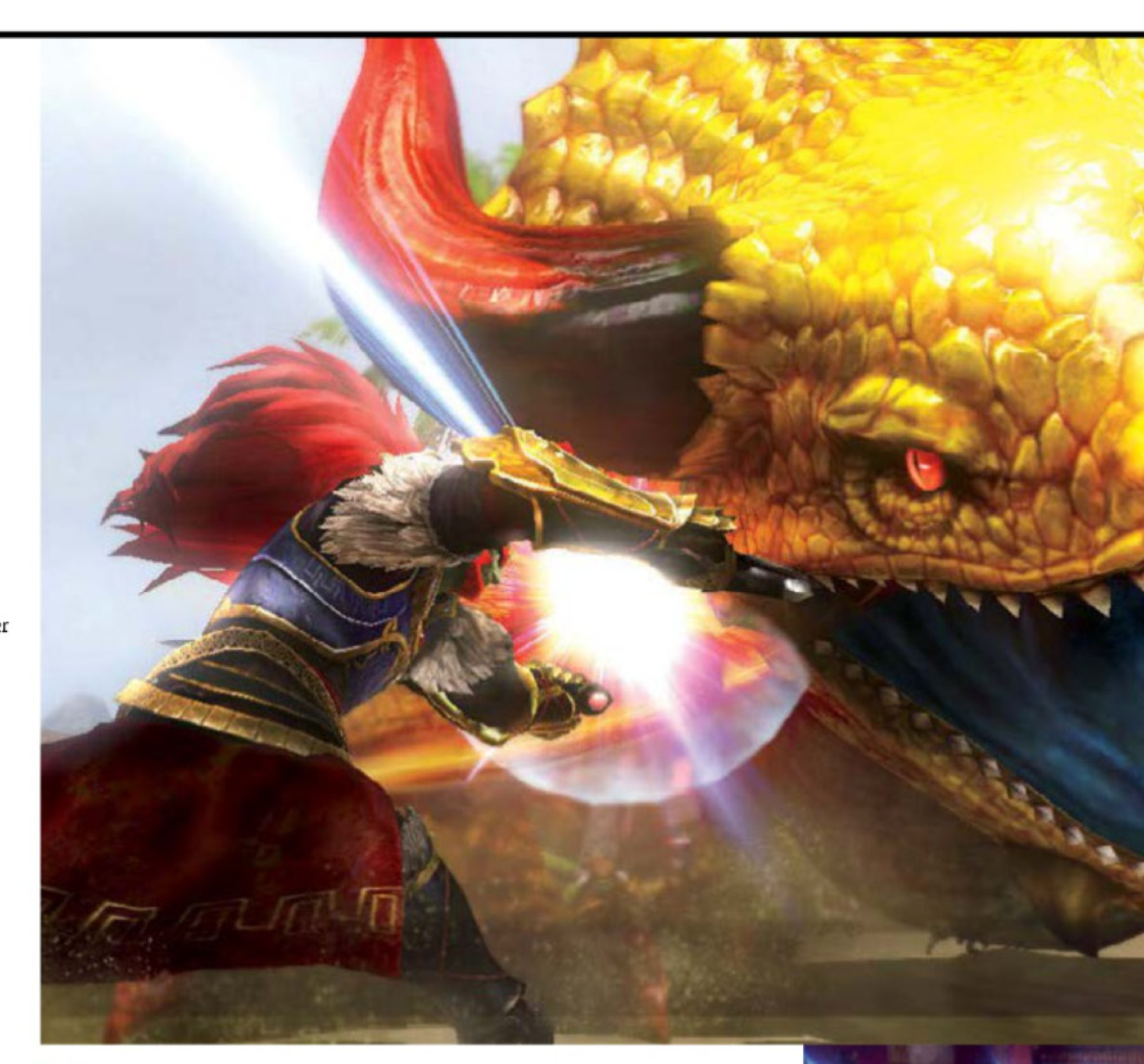
Legend Mode is the equivalent of a Shu, Wei, Wu or Jin campaign, but more substantial than a single kingdom's narrative. Hyrule is under attack from a witch named Cia and her allies Volga and Wizzro, and it's naturally up to Link to save the day. Only this time he's not the only one who gets to fight. As the story progresses through familiar *Zelda* locales – Eldin Caves, Faron Woods, Gerudo Desert – you'll gradually recruit new playable allies, starting with Impa, Sheik and newcomer Lana, each of which has their own distinctive fighting style.

You'll spend most of your time stringing together attacks by pressing Y and X in various combinations, but characters are distinguished by unique combat rhythms, pace and the weapons they wield. Link is nippy, nimble and a dab hand with a knight's sword and fire rod, while Impa is slower but carries a larger blade with greater range. Sheik is a delight: incredibly quick and capable of delivering swift attacks against a range of enemies in close quarters, her harp is an instrument of destruction. Before long, you'll have added *Skyward Sword*'s Fi, whose graceful, balletic moves might just make her a surprise favourite; Twilight Princess Midna, who uses a range of dark magic attacks and rides between encounters on a wolf; and *Ocarina of Time*'s Darunia. But this Goron heavyweight isn't nearly as much fun once you've unlocked the powerhouse that is Ganondorf, the campaign thrillingly letting you turn to the dark side.

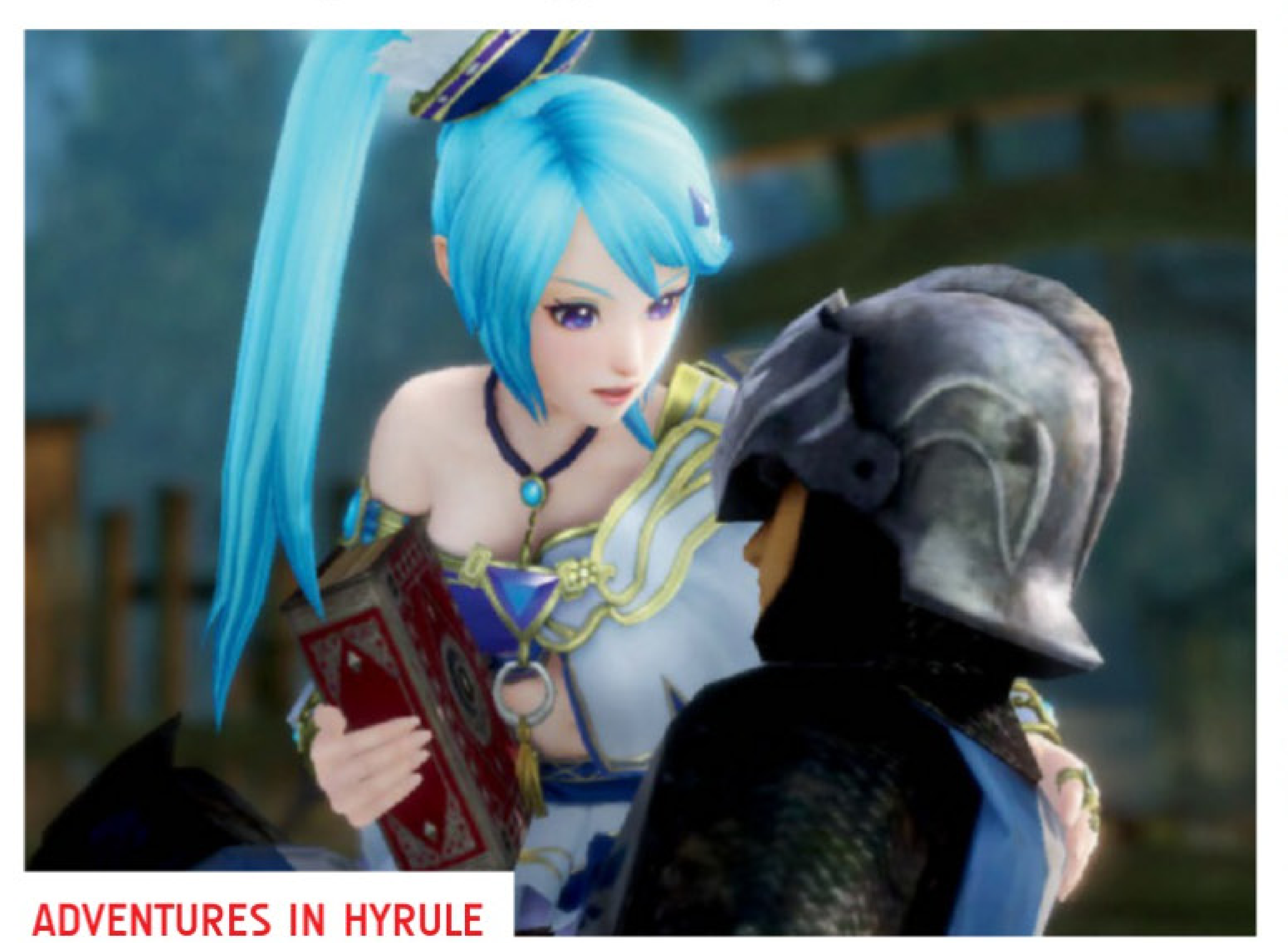
Each campaign stage is about 20 minutes of classic *Warriors* gameplay. You're given an ultimate objective and a fail state or two – usually involving the fall of a character or the

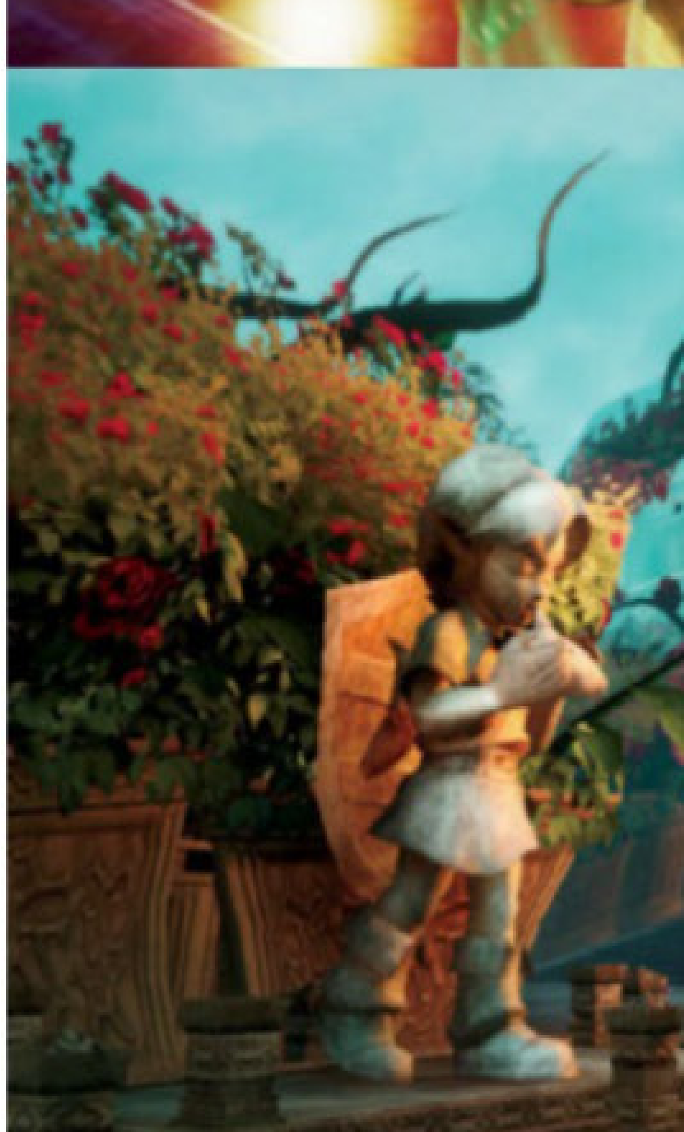
DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
OTHER FORMATS: N/A
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Omega Force/Team Ninja
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: 19 September (Japan: Out Now)
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



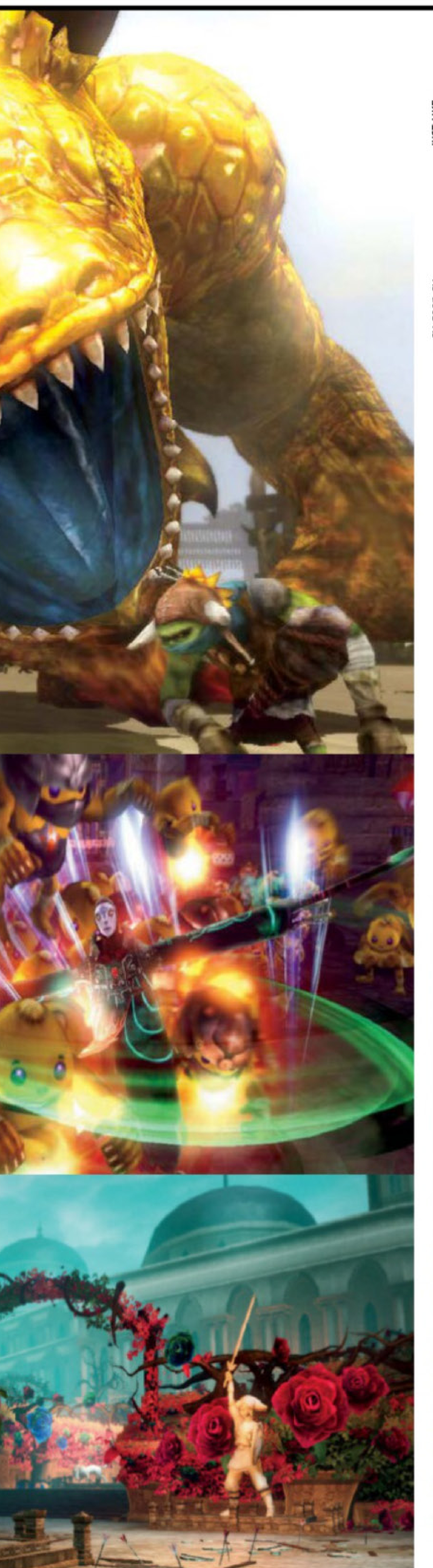
Right: Your magic gauge will rarely fill as quickly as the special meter, but once it's maxed out, you can activate it to temporarily boost your attack speed and reduce knockback when hit.
Below: This blue-haired mage is fun to fight as. She'll create magical barriers to shove or flatten opponents and if she's equipped with a Kokiri spear, she can summon the Deku Tree.





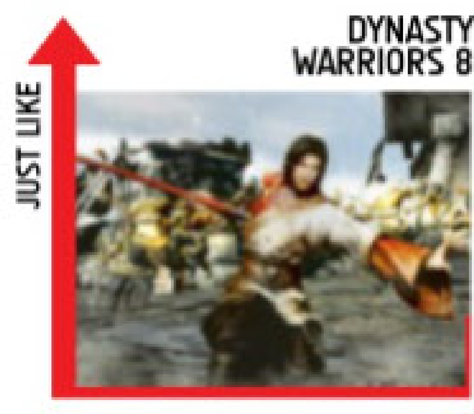
ADVENTURES IN HYRULE

Zelda's puzzles are almost entirely absent from Adventure Mode but there's a mild puzzle element to that mode. You'll earn an item for finishing most stages; these are used to search for items or to progress to otherwise inaccessible areas of the map. For example, candles will burn away bushes, while bombs will blow up rocks. You won't necessarily know where to use them without first obtaining a compass, which will highlight suspicious areas, though if you know *Zelda* games you'll have a fair idea of where to look on some screens. Some routes are easier than others, as you may only need a C rank to head west or north, though the difficulty is inconsistent, with some challenges seemingly designed to be tackled with a co-op partner.



JUST LIKE

DYNASTY WARRIORS 8





AS GOOD AS

WARRIORS OROCHI 3

FAQs

Q. BEST WEAPON?
Link's gauntlets are quite something, though we're fond of the Zora Scale's water attacks.

Q. MOST SATISFYING SPECIAL?
Sheik's weak-point smash. Rapid-fire cuts followed by a dismissive, back turned, harp strum.

Q. WHAT, NO GROOSE?
We're as disappointed as you are. For once, we'd welcome some DLC.

allied base – and sent into the fray. As ever, it's about cleaning up the red portions of the map and turning them blue: you'll want to capture outposts to stop enemies spawning, and storm strongholds, wearing down a gauge as you defeat hordes of grunts until the keep boss appears. Defeat him and the base is yours, though you'll occasionally be called back to defend it from assaults. AI allies will assist you, though it's a pity they can't be ordered to hang back and protect keeps you've acquired.

Larger enemies like Lizalfos, shielded Moblins and Poes are essentially *Hyrule Warriors'* officers. They'll block and hit back, pausing to charge up powerful moves, prompting you to retreat and step back in as their weak point is revealed. Deal enough damage while it's exposed and you'll pull off a smash attack, which can also take out any nearby foes – ideal if you've managed to corral a group of larger enemies together. A lock-on feature takes inspiration from *Zelda*'s famous Z-targeting, focusing the camera on more dangerous opponents, with a nudge of the right stick shifting it to the next named enemy.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

CROWD CONTROL: Enemy and allied armies are as voluminous as ever, but *Hyrule Warriors* handles the load better than usual. You'll see the odd frame-rate drop, but nothing disastrous.

The action will periodically be interrupted by a cutscene heralding the arrival of a familiar *Zelda* boss, in perhaps the biggest departure from the *Warriors*' formula. Each is defeated by a secondary weapon, and if you're familiar with Zelda you'll instantly know which one to use – you'll hurl bombs into King Dodongo's mouth and cause Gohma some serious ocular trauma with a bow and arrow. Once they've collapsed, you'll have a brief window in which to deplete their weak point gauge, until they awaken and the process repeats. Exploiting their weaknesses is simple but different scenarios make their return appearances more challenging than they might at first seem.

As with all sub-bosses, they'll release a cascade of rupees and materials upon death, which can spent at a bazaar between levels. Here, you can make and buy badges that give you more attacks, convey a range of defensive buffs, or increase the duration of power-ups for your secondary weapon.

While Free Mode allows you to indulge in iconoclastic pleasures like seeing Midna cutting about in Skyloft or Ghirahim helping Impa, Adventure Mode is the best place to level up your heroes. Taking place on a map inspired by the original *Legend Of Zelda*, your objective is to complete adventure battles of a comparable length to the campaign stages, as well as shorter form challenges, which might ask you to defeat multiple bosses, or to amass 500 kills in ten minutes. Success opens new routes, though the best rewards are reserved for A-rank performances, where time and care is of the essence. Surviving without taking damage – as you'll be forced to on stages where two hits are enough to kill you – involves much more than button mashing.

SURVIVING WITHOUT TAKING DAMAGE INVOLVES MUCH MORE THAN SIMPLE BUTTON MASHING



Above: Occasionally you'll need to locate a fairy before breaching an enemy base: some have elemental barriers that will damage you while you're within their walls.

Even that may not be enough to sway those who've previously dismissed the *Warriors* games, while series veterans might be a little dismayed to learn that each character only has one Musou attack. While *Hyrule Warriors* might want for modes and options compared to recent entries, it more than compensates with the variety of its roster, subtle refinements to its systems, and that extra layer of Nintendo polish. Against all odds, it works beautifully.



VERDICT 8/10

A SURPRISINGLY SUCCESSFUL SPIN-OFF

YO HO HO AND A BOTTLE OF HEALTH POTION

Risen 3: Titan Lords

For a game that we were hoping would address the multitude of gameplay issues in *Risen 2*, *Risen 3: Titan Lords* seems to have headed in the opposite direction, almost going out of its way to be hard to like. With graphics immediately reminiscent of the very best of PC gaming circa 2002, it took every last grain of willpower to refrain from booting up *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag* to play a pirate game we actually enjoyed.

It's clear from the very first scene that you will be facing some if not all of the same irritations as you're forced straight into a badly-animated sword fight. While this brief on-deck clash of swords tediously turns out to be all a conveniently didactic dream, giving you all the clunky combat skills you'll need for the game proper, it's a dull sign of what's to come. After waking up and having a chat with Patty (your pirate sister, obviously), you decide it's time for the pair of you to go treasure-hunting. Yargh, etc. And if *this* is all feeling a bit tedious, it's nothing compared to your death.

What should be a dramatic, poignant moment is rushed through as the next plot point. Returning as a soulless husk-to-be and with a wiped skill sheet, your primary concern is now your lack of life. At this point, the game gets to where it clearly wanted to actually begin. There are several islands to explore and a fair amount of freedom in doing so, quests and allegiances and an interesting levelling system where XP ("Glory") pays for attributes and then trainers turn them into skills you can use. It's all, once again, very familiar. It isn't enough to just be a pirate game any more; like *The Walking Dead* rose to the top of the mountain of zombie games by doing something different with the genre, something unique and engaging needs to be put forward or there really is very little point.



Above: If this game had a swear jar, everyone would be bankrupt by the end of the tutorial. It's not big, it's not clever, and worse, it's rarely funny.

Below: The combat is clunky and the animations are worse. We're having trouble understanding why more of a focus wasn't given to what is arguably the most important aspect.



DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360, PS3
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: Deep Silver
DEVELOPER: Piranha Bytes
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 2.4GHz, 2GB RAM, 512MB 3D card
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

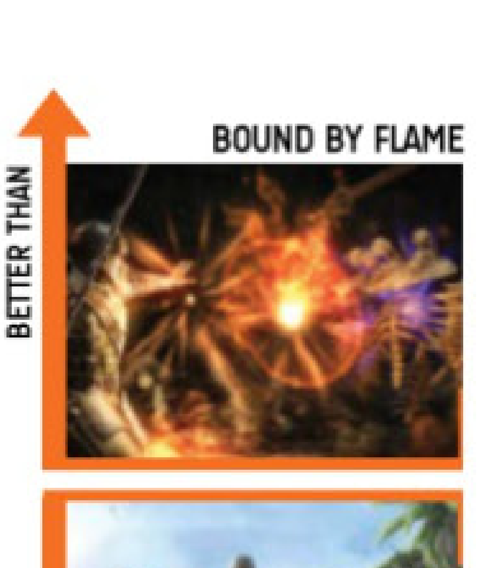
A SCRIPT FULL OF F-BOMBS, WITLESS SNARK AND TOE-CURLINGLY STEREOTYPICAL CHARACTERS

Risen 3 is a great example of a game with mostly poor content, but lots of it. Quests are everywhere, as is the opportunity to earn XP. Still, there's some abstract B-movie enjoyment to be had from the script full of f-bombs, witless snark and toe-curlingly stereotypical characters. It's not all bad, not at all, but it never seems more than just a big pile of objectives that have little to no emotional impact. An early diversion, for instance, is an optional bit of revenge on someone who betrayed you, courtesy of a voodoo doll, which lets you take mental control of a tough local and make the guy strip to his pants and dance.

Still, this wouldn't actually be quite so disappointing if the combat weren't so poor. It's action RPG style, built on timing and dodging, but with such long animations and such uncontrolled targeting and dodging and being knocked down by enemies (who almost always show up in groups of at least three) that it's little more than a constant annoyance, seemingly designed to make you grind your teeth with frustration. A little while in you get to choose a flavour of magic by joining one of three factions, but that's about the time that *Risen* hits the usual action RPG problem. You've likely levelled up and got the timing down to the point where the enemies just aren't much of a challenge any more. And you're rich enough to be able to afford enough instant-healing rum to drink past any challenge, and have worked out that there's no point going out with anyone except the healer, Bones, for his regular free top-ups in combat.

BETTER THAN

BOUND BY FLAME



WORSE THAN



ASSASSIN'S CREED IV: BLACK FLAG

It's not simply inferior to the likes of *The Witcher 2*, but other lower tier RPGs like *Bound By Flame*, with no sense of the rhythm of punch that makes this style satisfying. We were disappointed too when on finally

STOP THIEF!

One of the more interesting elements of *Risen* is how it handles human combat – in short, a character needs a good reason to kill rather than beat you up. Annoy them, which is very easy as the only difference between 'talk' and 'slash with sword' is whether it's drawn at the time. Making it silly though is that there's really no penalty, even if you openly steal peoples' stuff, turning it all into the most perfunctory kind of justice where you get a slightly bloody nose and told "Now don't do it again!" Still, it is good to see a world where not everyone instantly turns into a murderous psychopath just because you picked up their favourite fork and adds an extra layer of credibility to the world, even if it's somewhat thin.

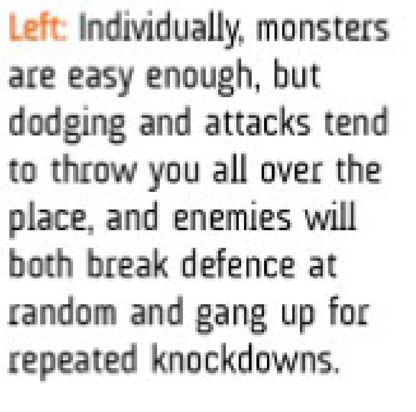
FAQs

Q. HOW PIRATEY IS THE ADVENTURE?
Very! Though the combat doesn't feel that swashbuckling, it's too heavy, you get a ship, a crew, and rum for health potions.

Q. DO I NEED TO HAVE PLAYED *RISEN 1* AND *2*?
No, but a few things from *Risen 2* aren't introduced very well, for absolutely no good reason.

Q. WHAT'S THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THIS AND GOTHIC?
Same developer, different series. This one has more of the *Gothic* flavour than last time, but it's its own thing.




Left: Individually, monsters are easy enough, but dodging and attacks tend to throw you all over the place, and enemies will both break defence at random and gang up for repeated knockdowns.

Above: Like *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag*, you'll take control of a vessel and engage in some rather exciting sea battles. Many of these are unavoidable, though, so you'd better enjoy them.

unlocking magic – Voodoo Pirate class, naturally – it only came with the option to buy spells for Jade we didn't have, and the cheapest on offer was "Parrot Flight: Turns You Into A Parrot." *Risen 3* does manage to claw a few points with the objectives that involve travelling between the various islands, and a few individual diversions like compulsory sea battles, and interesting plot elements like the regular trips into the underworld when sleeping. It loses many of them soon after, though, with characters from *Risen 2* reappearing without any real introduction, and the initial plot all too quickly turning into a to-do list. Again, there's potential here, but it's certainly not realised to its full capability.

Risen 3: Titan Lords is a game where a character urges you to hurry for the sake of your immortal soul, only to more or less in the same breath suggest a random detour for some general hero-work, and where nobody ever seems quite concerned enough that hellbeasts are exploding out of the ground. Really, it's treated as more of an annoyance, with your crew barely taking a moment for a "Oh, you're back" and your own sister refusing to join her newly-returned brother in his quest to save both his soul and the world until he upgrades his borrowed sloop to a real ship. Just like a real family member would.

There are certainly a slew of negatives to contend with, but the experience as a whole isn't awful. It's just thoroughly uninspiring, and brings almost nothing to the table that we haven't seen before, and better. It's fun to be a pirate, but it's far more fun in *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag*. When there's this amount of proof now that pirate games don't have to be so stale, there's really no excuse.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

PARADISE CITY: What really stands out about the *Risen* series is that as an open pirate RPG of sorts, it mixes fantasy RPG elements with bright sun-drenched environments, making for a novel atmosphere.

VERDICT 4/10
A POOR PIRATING ADVENTURE



Above: Your sister, Patty, is also a pirate. Curiously, she seems more concerned with you upgrading your vessel than with your lack of a pulse.

EARTHWORM VIM

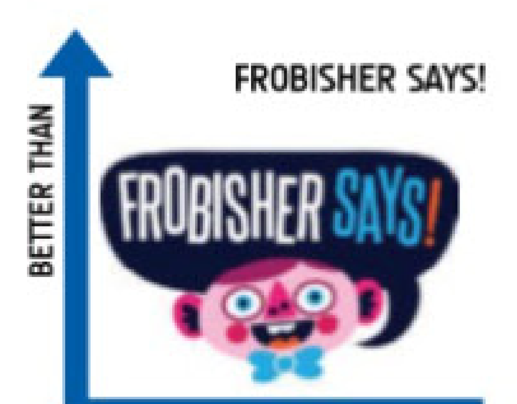
Hohokum

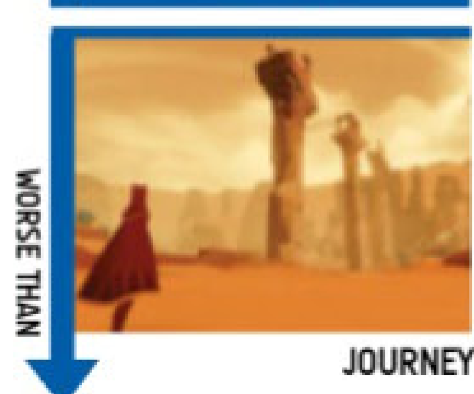
DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 4
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3, PS Vita
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Honeyslug, Sony Santa Monica
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

FROBISHER SAYS!





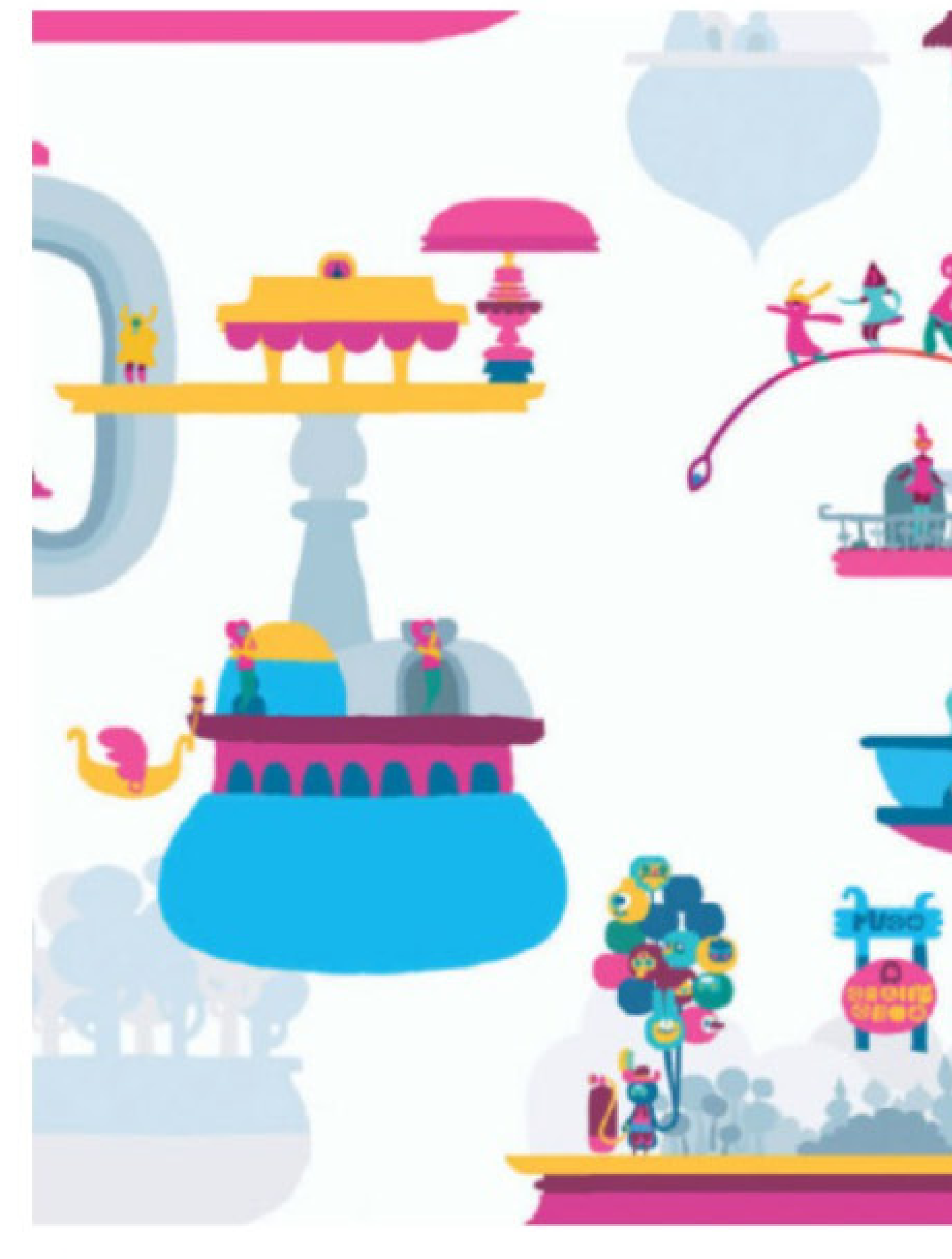
WORSE THAN

JOURNEY

When artist Richard Hogg collaborated with developer Honeyslug for *Frobisher Says!*, the result was a sensory assault; an unremitting torrent of cartoonish visuals matched with slapstick larks, each skit demanding full attention and instant understanding of its simplistic concept from its participants in order to succeed. Now, two years later, the pair has joined together once more for another eccentric burst of gaming at its most idiosyncratic. But don't be fooled by its similar appearance: *Hohokum* dedicates itself to ambiguity over clarity; discovery beyond signposting. It's less of a game and more of a sensory experience.

You control a character named Long Mover, a snake-like creature with an eye at its tip. Your interactions with the world are limited to steering and changing your speed, occasionally bumping into objects around the environment to trigger a reaction. These come in various distinct flavours, most of which tend to be tied into the central puzzle of each of the 17 multi-screen stages. You might find yourself taxiing around honey-collectors to fill a giant vat with the sugary liquid, guiding a mermaid through the sea to her ship-steering beau or leading the vanguard in an attack against an elephant holding an albino orangutan captive. Smaller gestures also contribute: whether smashing a series of fragile pots over with a few forceful nudges, tracing the circumference of a sunken sponge to further submerge the surrounding area in water or simply brushing against the psychedelic fauna to stimulate it into life. As you explore the world you begin to understand it further, and the way that each small piece slots into the larger puzzle.

There is a rough objective to each stage. Within each of these elaborate storybook puzzles is another wormy friend waiting to be freed. There's no real narration to inform you that this is your goal, in fact there almost zero text on the screen at all. It's a world designed for



Above: Some stages are packed with loads to do and interact with – almost too much in some cases.

Below: Some of the creature designs look exceptional. The elephant is a particular highlight. The best characters often make for the best levels.

FAQs

Q. WHAT'S THE STORY?
There isn't much of one, really. You're a snake-thing going about saving other snake-things.

Q. IS IT HARD?
A lot of the puzzles are quite challenging throughout and completists will struggle to find everything.

Q. WHO IS IT FOR?
Adorers of indie titles, those looking for something a *bit* different to the standard game release.

IT'S A FEVER DREAM OF BIZARRE CONCEPTS, ABSTRACT IMAGERY AND MEANINGFUL INTERACTION – SOMETHING THE BEATLES MIGHT HAVE COOKED UP IN THE SEVENTIES

trial and curiosity, illuminated by objects painted in primary colours, outlined by beguiling shapes that draw the eye and filled with creatures peculiar and inviting. It's not just a world that you're asked to explore but one you'll just feel compelled to. Still, the game does push you in some directions. There's a secondary goal to unlock a series of hidden eyes scattered across each of the stages. These will hang in obscure locations waiting to be brushed past to unlock. There are 146 eyes scattered across the game, collecting all of which will unlock an alternative ending (and you can keep track of how many you've found in the pause menu – a rare instance of clarity in an otherwise intentionally opaque design.

It's a surreal tour through an artist's mind. While there is a euphoric joy in floating across each landscape populated with the weird and wonderful, there's clear areas where the studio's mind has wandered that leaves areas of the design unclear and occasionally cluttered.

While the rabbit-hole concept behind the portals linking each of the worlds is an engaging concept, and further fuels the innate inquisitiveness the game inspires, disorientation becomes a problem in the latter portion of the game when you're trying to remember the location of the last few wormholes. And even within levels themselves, as you poke and nose around each object, the difference between elements that are integral to solving the central puzzle and those used as a throwaway distraction is difficult to detect. Both of the above annoyances are enough to derail the experience after much of the game is spent gliding peacefully through the world with a zen-like attitude, the relaxed pace soon turning to aimless wandering before tedium.

Still, *Hohokum* takes great strides to set itself apart from the traditional template of game design, and in that regard even its missteps deserve to be lauded in some capacity. It's a novel approach that also makes it a difficult game to talk about. Its art direction is vibrant and unified, its mechanics simplistic and completely functional, while its array of puzzles are meticulously structured and utterly charming. But that's barely scratching the surface of what sets *Hohokum* apart from its contemporaries.

It's a fever dream of bizarre concepts, abstract imagery and meaningful interaction, something The Beatles might have cooked up in the Seventies – the type of animated feature with an undercurrent of eeriness that evokes an emotional response from the player. There's a string of stirring imagery to rouse a myriad of reactions: feeding an imposing octopus diseased fish turning it a rusty-brown colour, or a giant standing beneath a lamp playing the violin while his diminutive sidekick sings beside him. It's as much whimsical as it is mysterious; as haunting as it is joyous. *Hohokum* is unique in every sense of the word.

But it won't be a game for everyone. The game offers a Trophy for completing it in under an hour, but we can't imagine the type of players *Hohokum* attracts will find this prospect appealing. It should be taken almost as a palette-cleanser; the type of experience you find yourself spending a few quiet hours immersed inside, soaking up its atmosphere and getting lost inside its dreamscape.

There's little doubt Honeyslug has created something truly original and utterly absorbing, but it's also a game that requires a detachment from reality along with a complete investment from its participants. Don't venture into *Hohokum* hoping to understand what it's all about, just sit back and enjoy the ride.

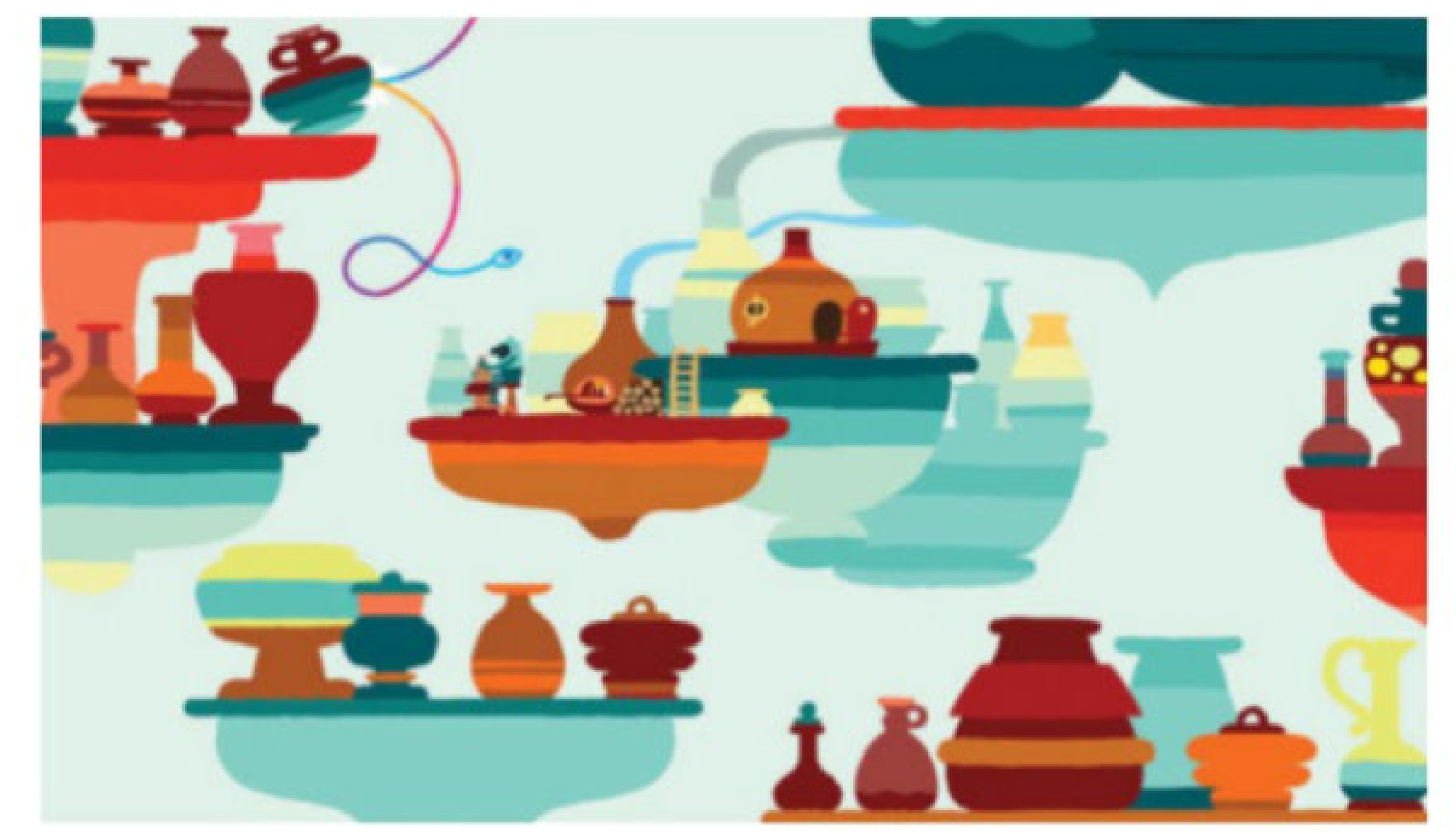


MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

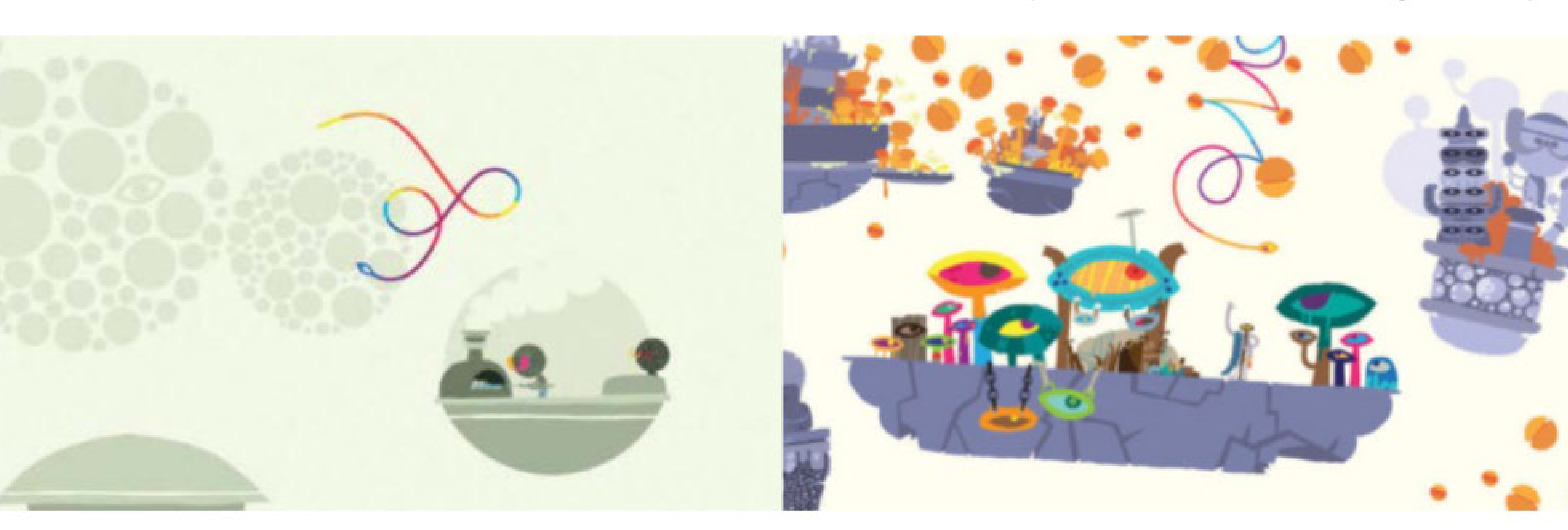
WORLD MAP: Given that it can often be confusing where the portals are to each of the worlds, a clearer map of the entire game-world would be a welcome concession to accessibility.

Below: You'll spend the first hour of the game just trying to understand what it's all about. Good luck.



Keeping In Touch

While the game is available as a cross-buy purchase – meaning you can pick it up on either PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4 or PS Vita and then play it on any device – the PlayStation 4 version features a few unique features. These revolve around the DualShock 4 controller and its touchpad capabilities. The most obvious addition is the use of the controller's light bar, which changes colour in time with your snake on the screen. Elsewhere, the touchpad enables players to trace the snake's path and make quick, sharp turns, which turns out to be a surprisingly impressive and functional alternative means of controlling your character.



JETPACKS: MAKING GAMES BETTER SINCE 1879

Firefall

Firefall has been through development hell over the last few years, and it's unfortunate that what it mostly has to show for it are the scars, and a yawning gap between potential and reality that not even the nimblest of its battleframes could jetpack across. When announced back in 2010, it looked like a true game of the future. Now, the only question it begs is where exactly all that time went, and just how its amazing-sounding experience ended up so flat.

The bulk of the game is a PvE focused, free-to-play FPS set on a future Earth where pretty much everything that can go wrong has – asteroid strikes, the world cloaked in a purple doom cloud called the Melding, aliens everywhere, and humanity having to take cheer in the fact that at least the fight back is based in Copacabana, the hottest and indeed pretty much only remaining spot north of Havana. It's a colourful and immediately engaging world, which starts promisingly – sun and sea instead of the usual doom and gloom, a free battleframe in a number of classes (some free up front, others unlockable later/purchasable up front with real money), and a flight system built to not merely let you jet around, but to do so in style.

Firefall's basic systems are easily its crowning glories. Its jetpacks are powerful and allow for long bursts, adding a verticality to both the terrain and combat. Its weapons are solid and punchy; the Assault's main weapon, for instance, being much like *Unreal Tournament*'s Flak Cannon with a splash-damage main projectile and shotgun-style secondary fire up close, and feeling like arcade action rather than just dice-rolls (though it is level based, and like any MMO, skill only goes so far). Combat is fast and kinetic, if not up to the purity of something like *Tribes: Ascend*, and generally plays fair. Enemy shots don't lock on, but can be dodged by jumping and otherwise getting out of their way, and enemies are endlessly more active than your average MMO mobs. They run

A FEW GOOD SYSTEMS IN SEARCH OF A GAME THAT DESERVES THEM

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: None
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Red 5 Studios
DEVELOPER: Red 5 Studios
PRICE: Free to play
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: MMO
MINIMUM SPEC: Dual Core 2.2Ghz, 4GB RAM, 1GB 3D card
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Right: It's a sweeping and attractive world, at least at a distance. Up close though, the models are primitive and most areas functional at best.

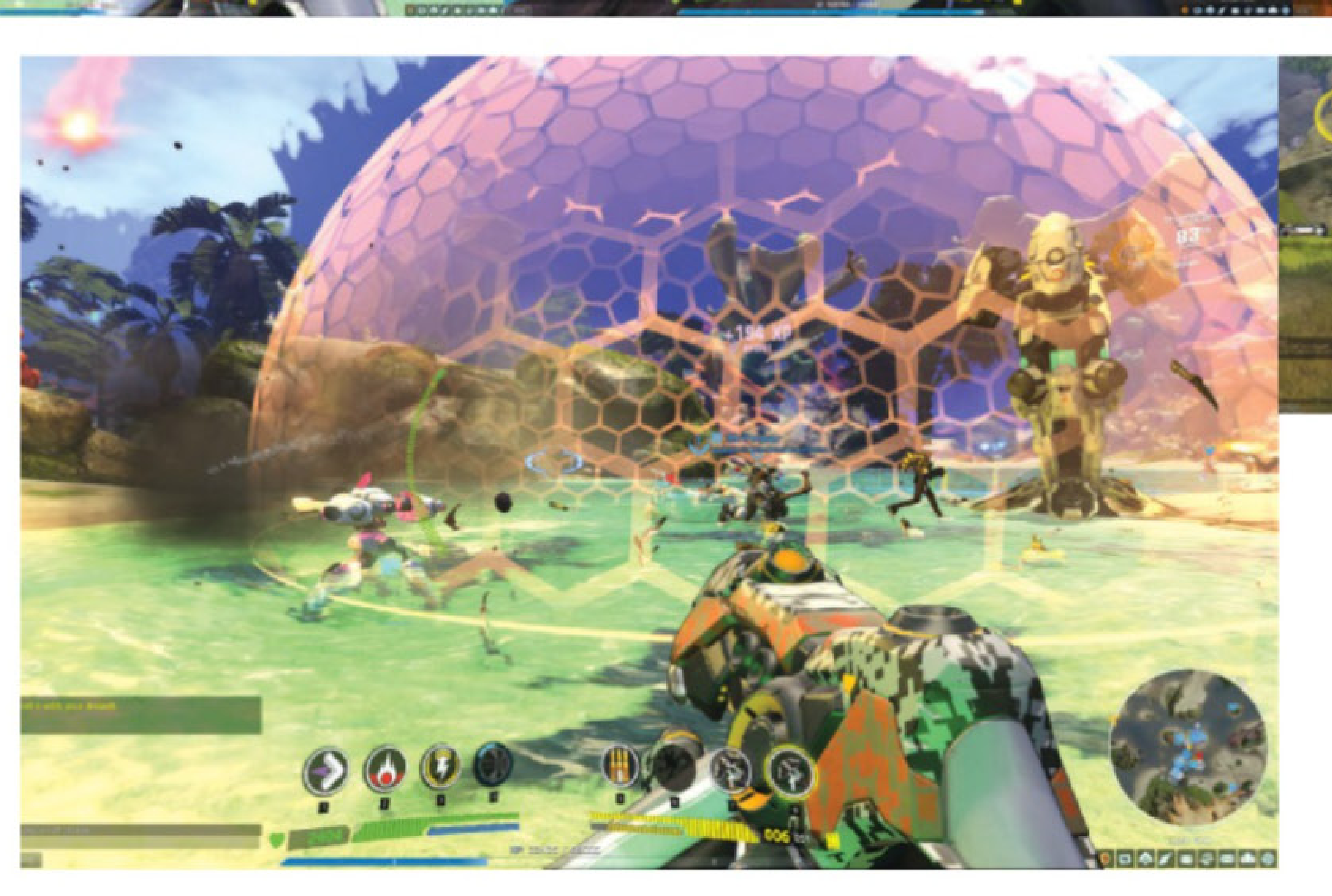


FAQs

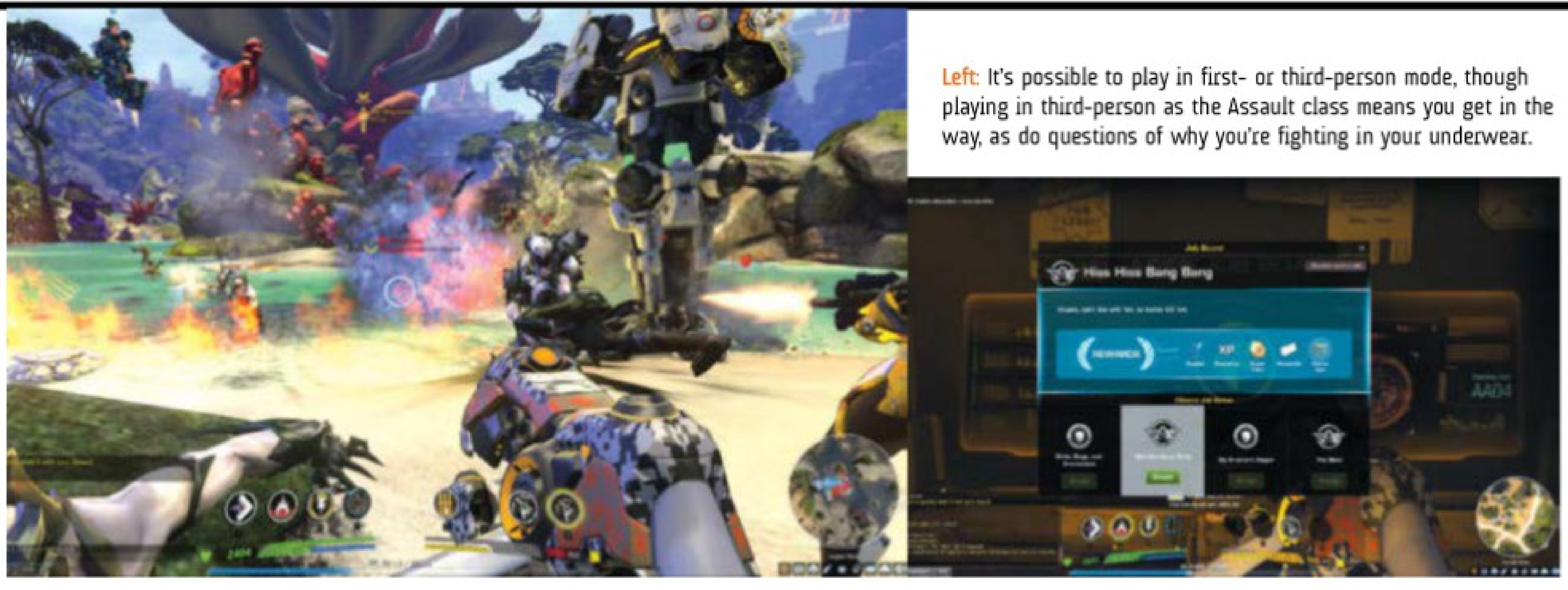
Q. WHAT DO I GET FOR FREE?
Five unlocked Battleframes, and access to the whole game. Most paid-content types are boosters, cosmetics, and earlier access to later unlocks.

Q. WHAT KIND OF PRICES ARE IN THE CASH SHOP?
A mix. Roughly £1 for an hour's XP boost, £10 for an advanced Battleframe, £15 for a mount.

Q. IS THIS A PAY-TO-WIN GAME?
No. For starters, it's almost all PvE until the endgame. But everything is slower when done free, from unlocks to crafting. "VIP" players get a 25 per cent in-game cash boost.







Left: It's possible to play in first- or third-person mode, though playing in third-person as the Assault class means you get in the way, as do questions of why you're fighting in your underwear.



around, they charge into battle rather than just standing around and waiting for their turn to be obliterated, and they keep the pressure on when pushing into their territory. They're hardly tactical geniuses, but they're not just your average MMO cannon fodder either.

What *Firefall* does with them, though, completely squanders most of the potential. When it flows, it flows really well. There are dedicated scripted missions where you fly to instanced locations for choreographed adventures, and group activities like raiding an enemy base, protecting 'thumpers' as they mine and taking out tornadoes spawned by the Melding, where you can be fighting alongside a whole team of players, plasma flying and enemies exploding all around and good times and generous XP boosts being had by all. There's also a PVP zone, but it's end-game content – you can technically go there earlier, though only to die.

Most of the game is spent picking up meaningless crapwork from Job Boards, where the objectives will invariably be walking too far to kill eight or so guys and then walking too far to talk to another guy and kill another eight guys, and then back to speak to another guy until you start hallucinating with boredom. There are ways to cut down on the walking, including crafting cheap glider pads and using one-time mounts until you either buy one from the cash shop or endure the levelling until you can get one for real, but there's still too much dead time. And the reward? Little more than unlocking more boring quests and hoping to run into a more profitable group activity en route, with just the occasional break for a proper mission amid the blah.

Firefall tries to make them more interesting with stories, including multiple-part ones that continue at the various hubs, but it has no idea how. Instead of picking up on the lessons of games like *World Of Warcraft*, all it offers are long-winded talking heads where you don't even get to say anything – you're simply muscle, with a mission-control girl who decides on her own how you feel about things. Which, incidentally, is likely to be 'annoyed' on a regular basis, partly because she seems completely oblivious to the crapsack world around her, but mostly thanks to *Firefall* frequently halting, sometimes permanently, on the message 'Loading Next Objective' or otherwise glitching out mid-mission and making you repeat the whole thing.

The heavy focus on these missions is arguably *Firefall*'s biggest mistake. Everything about it screams to be built around group activity, from impromptu territorial defence to assaults on army-level threats, but at most it currently dips its toes into the water with the same basic templates, and then retreats to the bland safety of canned missions where other players tend to be a nuisance instead of a help. It doesn't help that, while levelling up one battleframe isn't too painful with enough TV to watch, you have to repeat the process for each one in turn, with the only way to speed things up being to drop money in the cash shop or convert a mountain of in-game currency until you have enough to buy boosters.

There's certainly potential for things to improve as time goes on, with more group content, more involved territory control and other elements to keep the action going and leave the scripted content for just the quiet moments, and otherwise make the most of the solid main combat. At the moment though, *Firefall* quickly wears out its welcome; beaten to the punch by games like *Tribes: Ascend* and the aforementioned *Planetside 2*. There's still space for a PvE focused take on open world combat, and in time this could well fill it. For now though, it's a few well-engineered systems in search of a game that fully deserves them.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

IMPROVING PVE: PvE can never offer the freshness of PvP, but being part of a player army can work. It needs to focus on that, not solo content, aka The Tabula Rasa Mistake.



Left: There are some really good bits of incidental detail scattered around the world, empty as most of it is.



LET'S GLIDE

Gliders are one of the most useful items in the *Firefall* world. Most tall structures have pads, and you can craft/buy your own to launch from anywhere. They make it possible to cross the terrain quickly, but still with a minor sim element to avoid crashing or plunging straight into the ground. If you don't, you can get to the start of any mission pretty easily. Getting anywhere after that means a long, boring and uneventful trip though, with not much to see en route unless you stumble into a group event like a resource thump or assault on an enemy base. Top tip – the Num Lock key is 'auto run'. Get used to using it.

THE ONE LESS TRAVELLED BY

Road Not Taken





Above: Fire can be invaluable, making it possible to carry objects without worrying about your energy levels. The trees required to make the fire, however, are often required to unlock access to the next area – thus, the balancing act of *Road Not Taken*

You can't fault *Road Not Taken* for its inventiveness. Though the game is primarily a match-three puzzle game – the likes of which developer Spry Fox itself had already mastered with *Triple Town* – it provides enough of a twist to the core mechanics that there's a genuine sense of revelation about it. Much like *Triple Town*, in fact, matching certain items together creates a new, related item. To provide a fairly simple, low-level example: match three beehives, get honey. But there's more to it than that, however, and it soon becomes a game as much about learning and understanding the repertoire of combinations as it is moving about each puzzle you encounter.

Road Not Taken is wrapped around a central conceit that pits you as a mysterious ranger whose task it is to venture into frozen forests to rescue stranded children. You'll move about randomly chosen grid-based environments, picking up objects and flinging them alongside others to create new items, destroy aggressive ones or simply unlock one of the barred gateways. Though it may not sound it, this does make for surprisingly compelling gameplay as you balance your dwindling energy to try and hunt down each and every whippersnapper in the forest. There's a hub-based section to interact with various NPCs, but the crux of the game relies on its puzzle-based discovery.

In fact, a successful journey into the forest makes the next one progressively tougher until you either die or return home, defeated and with only half of the children rescued (you need to collect at least half before you can leave). There's an underlying sense of guilt enforced on you should you leave unfinished, but since dying forces you to restart your career as a ranger all over again – and any boons you've collected then relinquished – you quickly learn that half a failure is better than no success at all. Perhaps that's a message that Spry Fox wanted to impart with *Road Not Taken*, but as a game it feels like a bit *too* harsh.

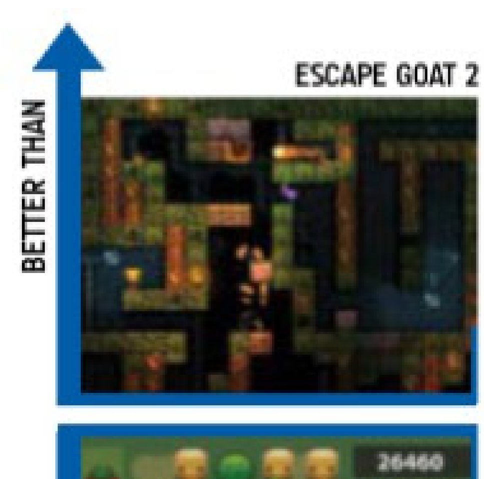
But that isn't the problem with the puzzler, however. Though the beasties change – and the increased difficulty with each round will definitely get you thinking – the game itself never does. Its art style, tone and unique gameplay all make for a fascinating experience that you should certainly give a try, but it's hard to ignore the sense of repetition. Randomly generated puzzles results in increased replayability, but it also means a lack of variety – and that forms the ultimate demise of *Road Not Taken* when it is so clear there is an end goal.

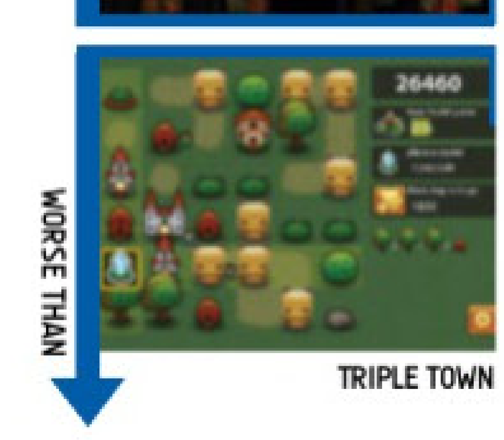
DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Spry Fox
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

ESCAPE GOAT 2





TRIPLE TOWN

WORSE THAN

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

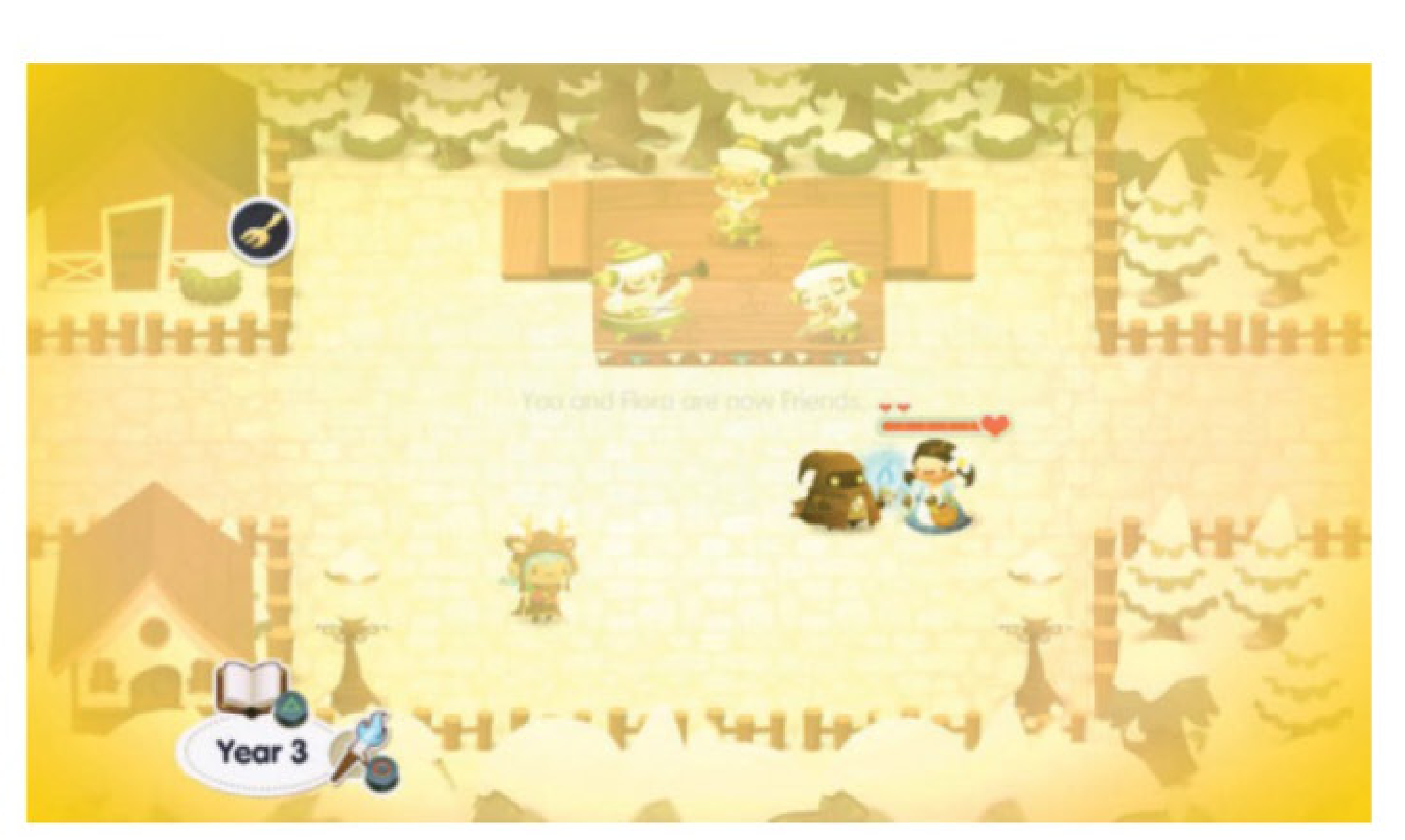
DRAG AND DROP: The art style and tone both make *Road Not Taken* feel original, but it's the clever combination mechanic – and the way different items interact – that makes this puzzler standout.

VERDICT 7/10

GREAT FOR KILLING AN HOUR, BUT NOT MUCH ELSE

Below: The NPC interactions are quaint as you give them gifts to become better friends with them, but the permanence of their status means that – should you die – you'll collect even fewer rewards from them.





TELEPORTING THE SERIES TO ANOTHER PLANET

Velocity 2X

Below: Despite being an entirely new addition, *Velocity 2X*'s 2D platforming sections are integrated so well that they now feel like an vital part of *Velocity*'s formula. How did we ever do without them?



DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
OTHER FORMATS: PS4
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: FuturLab
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: TBA
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Given that *Velocity 2X* is a game that's all about speed, let's get straight to the point: the game is bloody brilliant. It retains and refines the elements that made the first Velocity game a success and ups the ante when it comes to polish and presentation. More importantly, though, *Velocity 2X* is a game that proves that FuturLab didn't run out of ideas first time around.

For the benefit of the uninitiated, *Velocity 2X* is a vertically scrolling shooter where the focus is on getting from start to finish as quickly as possible while picking up survivor pods on the way. A brilliant teleport mechanic provides the unique hook, requiring the player to swiftly dart around the stage to collect the survivor pods you'll need for a perfect score, or simply to avoid wrecking your ship at a dead end. Mastering the process while rushing through stages at breakneck speed can be demanding if you're going for those perfect runs, but the game feels slick and responsive, ensuring that failure usually isn't that frustrating.

As you move into *Velocity 2X*'s middle to latter stages, you'll likely not have mastered every element of the game, but you will notice that you've been introduced to a whole raft of techniques and mechanics without ever being baffled. The game is masterful in its pacing, introducing new ideas at a rate that not only allows the player to comfortably integrate new skills into their arsenal, but which keeps the game feeling fresh with new ideas. Even when the base elements have all been established, level design that gradually demands more from the player as it asks them to use the game's multiple mechanics keeps things interesting.

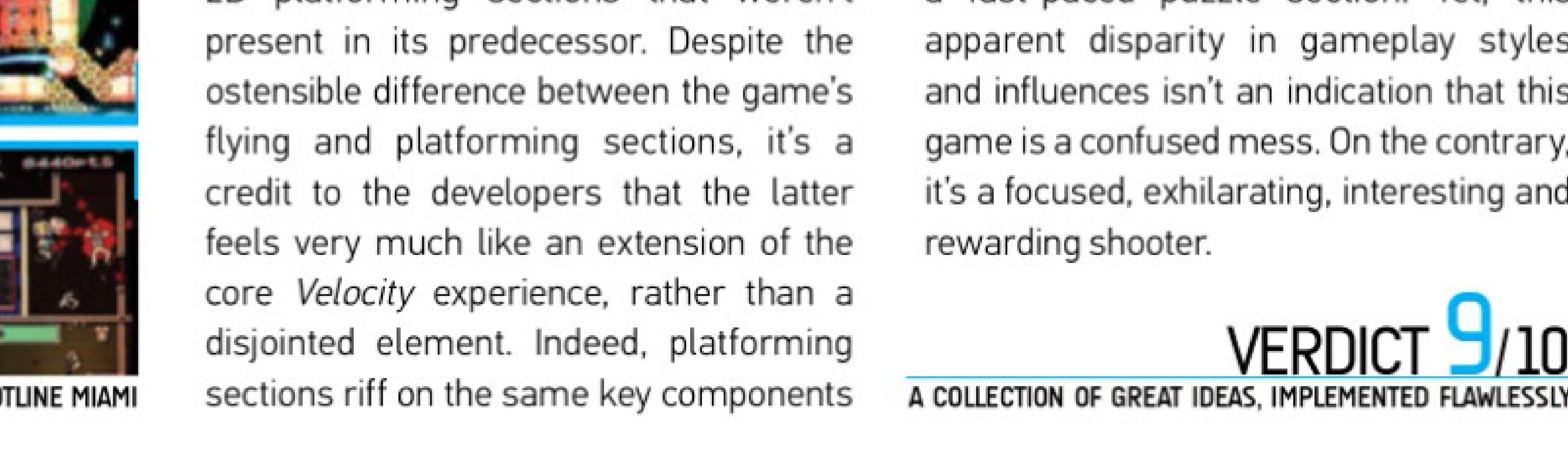
Speaking of new ideas, a significant portion of *Velocity 2X* is given over to 2D platforming sections that weren't present in its predecessor. Despite the ostensible difference between the game's flying and platforming sections, it's a credit to the developers that the latter feels very much like an extension of the core *Velocity* experience, rather than a disjointed element. Indeed, platforming sections riff on the same key components present in the piloting sections, ensuring that switching between the two feels completely natural.

That ability to provide variety without losing its core identity is perhaps *Velocity 2X*'s greatest strength. One minute you'll be engaged in an intense boss battle that takes its cue from bullet-hell shooters, the next you'll be taking part in what is essentially a fast-paced puzzle section. Yet, this apparent disparity in gameplay styles and influences isn't an indication that this game is a confused mess. On the contrary, it's a focused, exhilarating, interesting and rewarding shooter.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

JETTISON THE STORY: *Velocity 2X* sensibly avoids shoving a narrative down your throat, but what you end up with is story so throwaway that it may as well not be there at all.



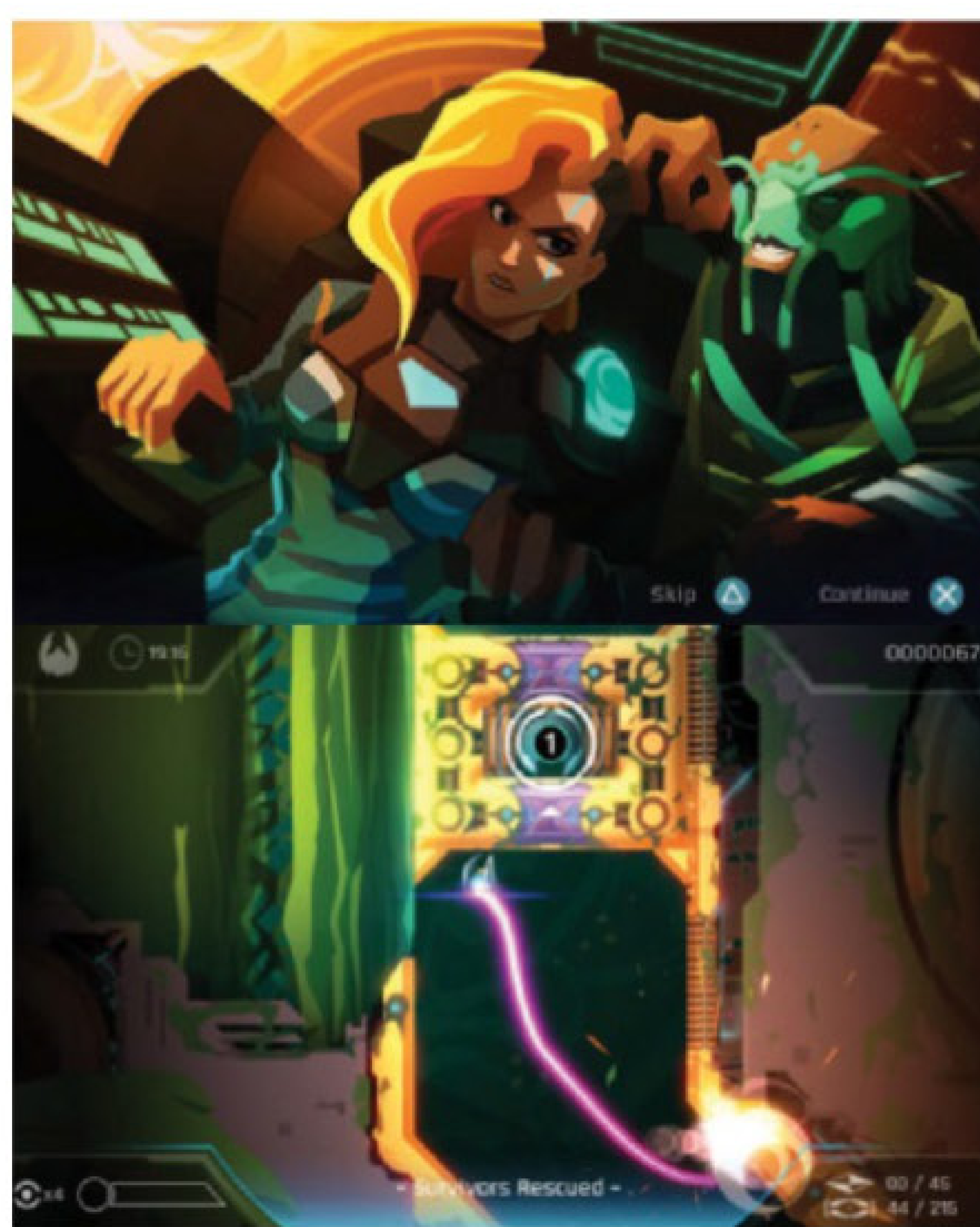
BETTER THAN — VELOCITY ULTRA

WORSE THAN — HOTLINE MIAMI

VERDICT 9/10

A COLLECTION OF GREAT IDEAS, IMPLEMENTED FLAWLESSLY







Above: Production values are patently higher in *Velocity 2X*. Not only is it far better than its predecessor in a visual sense, but it also has a great soundtrack.

READ BETWEEN THE LINES

Metrico

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: Netherlands
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Digital Dreams
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN — THOMAS WAS ALONE

WORSE THAN — PORTAL 2

It's not enough for an indie game to be different these days, it really has to *look* different to stand any sort of chance of success. But we also know that doesn't bear quite as much relevance as you'd believe as to how the game functions. So, while most indie games understand the importance of art design, few actually grasp the necessity to contextualise its stylistic choices in mechanics and gameplay.

Superficially, *Metrico* stands out because it looks like the brainchild of Vince Frost; its bitesize puzzles consist of a hypnotic stream of shapes, charts, percentages and other infographic-type objects – each could just as well have been precisely sculpted in InDesign, printed on the page and rested alongside a Taschen book on a coffee table.

But almost everything, in some meaningful measure, informs how you progress through its series of trials. Bars rise and fall depending on how often you jump, lines trace along the screen alongside steps you take in a specific direction. The platforming is augmented by shifting parameters that react to your inputs, demanding close attention be paid to the numbers, coordinates and percentages that offer slight hints as to what your best next move might be.

Experimentation plays a huge role, and while the game continually presents new rules and tools that push players into more complex territory, the clear introduction to each of its shifting dynamics avoids grounding its remarkable pace.

But that doesn't mean that it all works as cohesively as it should. While a large part of the design revolves around simple movements – moving from one side of the screen to the other to trigger platforms, or jumping to extend the height of others – the implementation of PS Vita's more advanced hardware features is more hit and miss. Using the rear touch pad to aim your projectile is overly cumbersome, while the gyroscope will have you twisting the console wildly to extend the length of some platforms. The Vita's novel hardware had the potential to tie the visuals and gameplay together but instead too often frustrate to strengthen that bond.

Despite some fumbles (complaints levied more at the hardware), Metrico has an enduring charm that draws you back in. It's an elegantly detailed and calculated puzzle-adventure that throws players into an office-clerk nightmare of pie charts and statistics with the only means of escape some good ol' fashioned thinking.

It's a strong contender for the best puzzle game of the year so far and, if nothing else, will leave you marvelling at the sheer beauty of its unified ambition.

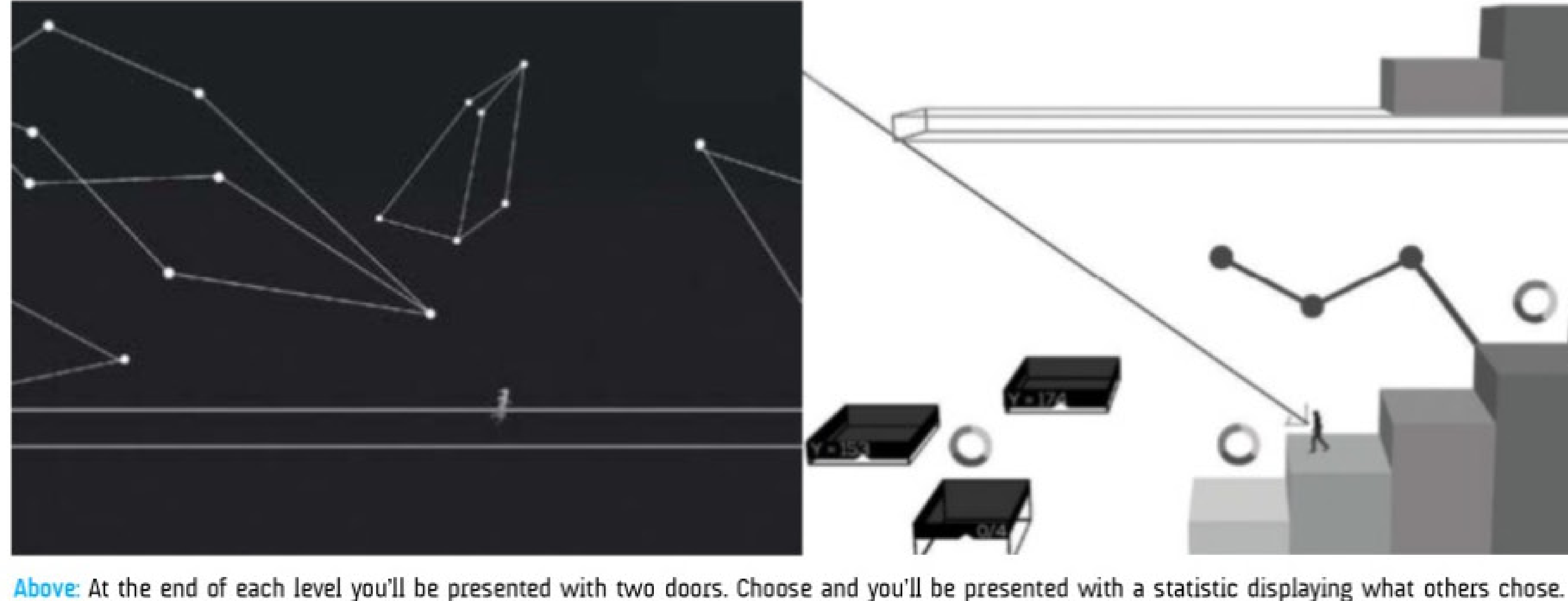
Above: While there are a number (see what we did there?) of statistics that directly relate to your inputs, there's a number of infographic-type objects that loom ominously on the horizon.



FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

NUMBER CRUNCHING: The game is a traditional platformer but uses percentages, angles and fractions to guide players through its puzzles. The result is something unique both in style and gameplay.



Above: At the end of each level you'll be presented with two doors. Choose and you'll be presented with a statistic displaying what others chose.

VERDICT 8/10

THE MOST STYLISH GAME YOU'LL PLAY THIS YEAR

DECK-BUILDING FINALLY ARRIVES, BUT AT A COST...

Magic 2015: Duels Of The Planeswalkers

There's an old saying that goes 'Be careful what you wish for'. It's relevant here, because ever since Stainless Games released its first digital interpretation of *Magic: The Gathering* in 2009, gamers having been crying out for full-deck customisation. Five years and five games later, it's finally appeared – but it comes at quite a steep cost.

First up, the good news – the actual deck-building process is extremely robust and relatively easy to navigate. There are 298 cards that have been split into cards from five popular planes: Innistrad, Theros, Zendikar, Shandalar and Ravnica. Additionally, there are cards that are only available in premium booster packs, but more on those later. Once you've turned the relevant options off, it's possible to tweak everything in your deck, from the number of creatures and spells, to the different types of land you want. The pool of cards is extremely varied as well, allowing you to create a large number of different deck types, ranging from fast aggro decks to grindy control counter decks and even mill decks.

Booster packs are earned every time you complete a section of the substantial campaign mode, granting you up to 14 cards, with one rare or mythic card being included. Once the campaign mode has been completed, you can choose to keep on exploring each plane in order to win an additional booster. Yes, doing this can prove to be a grind, but at least it allows you to continually earn new cards for no cost.

Of course, if you want to speed things up then there's always the option of simply buying premium booster packs for the price of £1.49 a pop. Alternatively, you can purchase all the cards except the premium ones for £13.99, then there's the ability to convert your favourite cards to foils for an additional amount of cash and... well, you get the idea.

There's a big emphasis on spending additional cash, which would be fine if you weren't paying money up front. While you unlock cards more quickly than in past games, your deck still feels underpowered in the early parts of the campaign. It's not as much of a cash-grab as many have suggested, but it lacks the versatility of *Hearthstone*, where you could at least destroy cards to get the ones you want. Here, you have to physically buy cards if you want

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: iOS, Android, Xbox One, Xbox 360
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Wizards Of The Coast
DEVELOPER: Stainless Games
PRICE: £6.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1 (2-4 ONLINE)
MINIMUM SPEC: 1 GB RAM, 2Ghz CPU, 512MB DirectX 9.0c compatible video card
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

IT LACKS THE VERSATILITY OF HEARTHSTONE, WHERE YOU COULD AT LEAST DESTROY CARDS

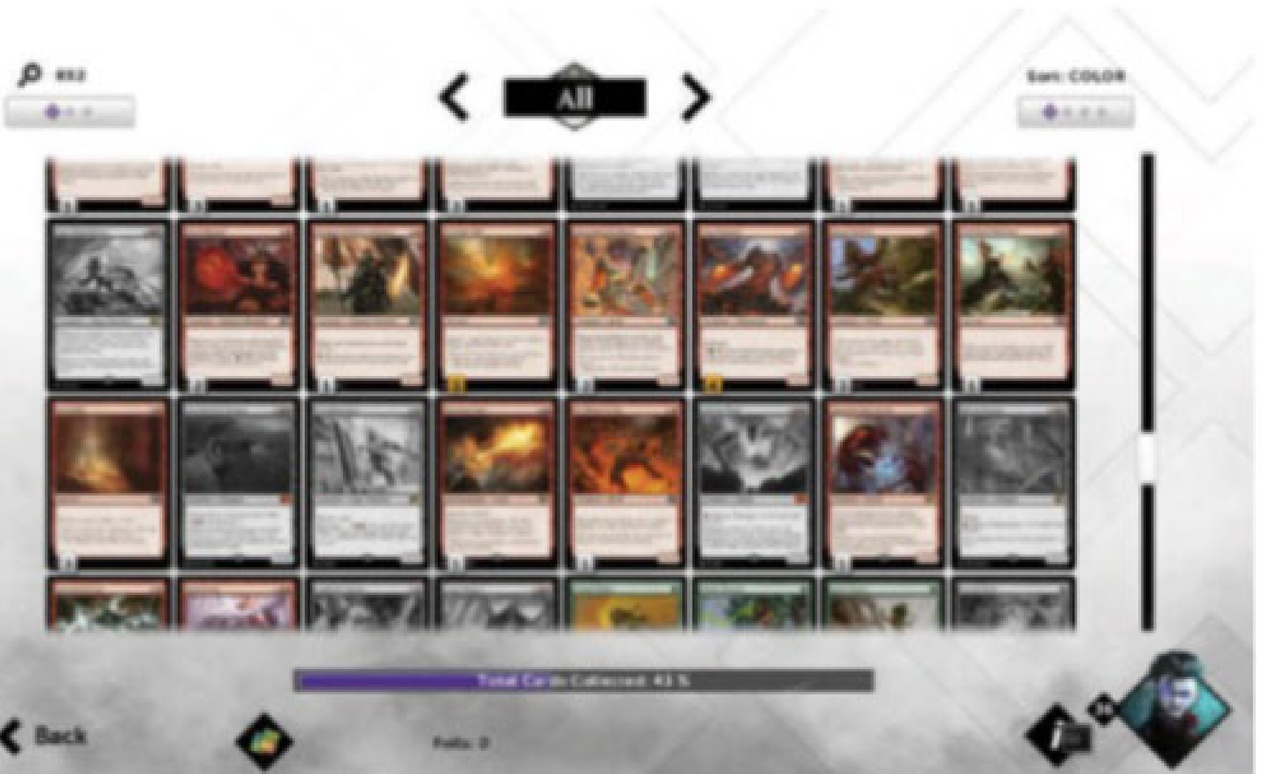
FAQs

Q. ARE THE PUZZLES INCLUDED?
Sadly not. One of the best parts of previous games is nowhere to be seen.

Q. ANY DLC?
We've seen none announced yet, but there have always been decent updates in the past.

Q. BETTER THAN ONLINE MAGIC?
Hard to say. While it's certainly cheaper to play, it still lacks the sheer breadth and variety of the core product.





Left: Here's another example of the broken AI. The computer simply keeps the first hand it gets rather than doing a mulligan to get something better.



Right: In around 60 won games, we've only opened one of the 12 mythic cards, which is pretty poor going.



Below: The AI is truly disappointing, meaning there's very little challenge through the main campaign. Sights like this happens far too regularly for our liking.

to get a complete collection, which feels a tad naughty.

While the deck-building system is admittedly pretty enjoyable and really shines online, things prove to be less impressive in the main campaign. Unlike previous versions, you're saddled with a pretty weak starter deck, with few additional ones to unlock, meaning you need to be a good player or, hey, buy some additional cards to give yourself a better chance.

The campaign is admittedly pretty large, consisting of five sections and 25 total levels to pass. Unfortunately, the AI is pretty poor throughout. We lost count of the number of times the computer would just make a suicide charge or tap the wrong mana when we were playing cards. It becomes more noticeable when games tend to reach a stalemate and the cards in play mount up, but even relatively early on the computer will make odd plays, like keeping a hand and only playing one land for an entire game. Past versions saw the computer playing almost cheating hands, continually playing the same cards in the same order over and over again. While Stainless Games has at least solved this problem, in doing so has created a whole set of new ones.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

DECK BUILDING: It is worth highlighting that the deck-building is very good and intuitive, allowing you to easily adapt existing decks or create your own.

The poor AI becomes increasingly apparent and even more of a chore upon completing the campaign, as you will continually be playing the unchallenging AI to unlock those needed cards. It's unfortunate that Stainless Games has dropped the ball so heavily here, as the sheer number of decks, both in term of their variety and structure, is impressive. It's means nothing, though, when they constantly falter due to laughable plays that you'd expect to see from a newcomer to *Magic*, and not a developer who has been heavily working on the franchise for the past five years.

The overall UI is pretty poor as well. It's clearly designed for touch-screen play, with the player expected to swipe through sections, but it becomes increasingly tiresome on PC. It's further compounded by annoying issues like pulling you back to the main menu when you want to edit your deck, rather than taking you back to where you last were in the campaign. It's certainly not a deal-breaker, but it feels fiddly and cumbersome, while the new layout Stainless Games has chosen for when you actually play is ugly to say the least.

The multiplayer mode is the one saving grace of *Magic 2015*, allowing you to take your decks online and take part in two-, three- and four-player games. Even this ultimately proves to be far from perfect though, as Two-Headed Giant, the popular format of past versions, is no longer available, and currently offers no option to have a rematch, instead throwing you back to the main online lobby. Oh, and it no longer rewards you with cards for winning, once again lessening your options for deck-building and steering you back towards those premium boosters.

Also, did we mention that this is the most bare-boned version of the game yet? Aside from the campaign mode, all you get is the – admittedly slick – training area and a practice arena, making this the most basic version of *Magic* yet. Yes, there's no denying that the core game is as good as ever (providing you're playing against a human opponent), but this is otherwise a huge step back for the series, undoing all of Stainless Games' previous hard work.

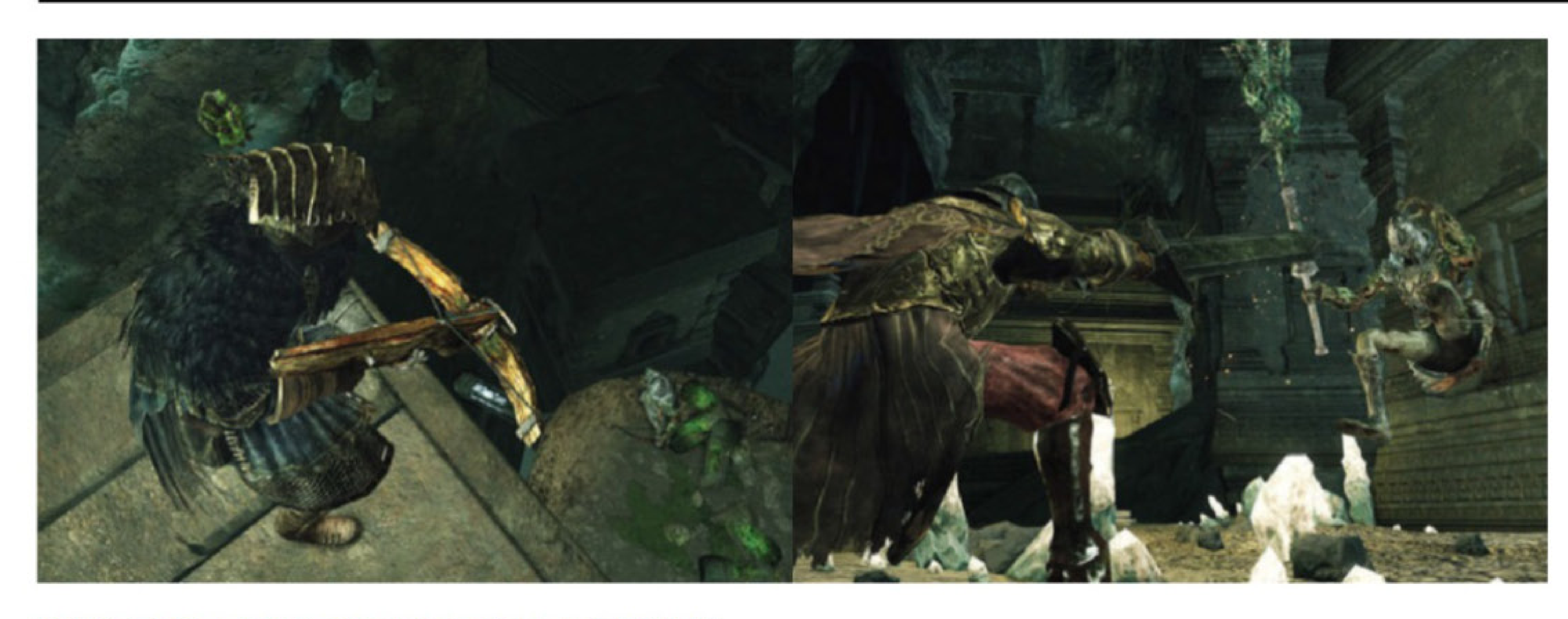
MULTIPLAYER MADNESS

The most satisfying aspect of *Magic 2015* is the multiplayer mode. Unfortunately, Stainless Games has even managed to make this worse than previous versions due to the untidy lobbies and the lack of instant rematches. Having said that, the variety of decks online is decent, and while a lot of players use green/white token decks, it's possible to make decent decks. Leaderboards ensure that there's something worth fighting for, but the inability to earn extra cards upon winning means you'll probably not play it exclusively until you've unlocked (or bought) all available cards.





A SOLID MULTIPLAYER GAME, RUINED BY POOR AI



Left: The new bosses are far from easy – good luck attempting one in particular without summoning help...

KING FOR A DAY, GHOUL FOR A LIFETIME

Dark Souls II: Crown Of The Sunken King

As ridiculous as it may sound, a common complaint about *Dark Souls II* from hardcore fans of the series is that it wasn't hard enough. To be fair to them, between the finite enemy respawns, the myriad bosses and our familiarity with the franchise's mechanics, *DSII* is the easiest of the *Souls* trio. Not that anyone could outright declare it an easy game, mind. Either way, those braggarts who wanted more of a challenge might want to be careful what they wish for, because *Dark Souls II: Crown Of The Sunken King* is absolutely brutal.

You can reach the new DLC areas from around the halfway point in the main game, but don't even think about it – you'd have about as much luck trying to Platinum the core game using a dance mat. Even the basic enemies that populate the first Sanctum area are absurdly powerful, and unless you're near or at the end of the main game, you'll struggle to put a dent in them. Unlike the Old Knights in Heide's Tower, it's not even like you can realistically take them on while under-levelled – enemies in this expansion come in greater numbers and display more of a pack mentality than any other foe, effectively just forming a gank squad the moment you wander into their eyeline.

Even when you *are* powerful enough, you'll still need to brave environments unlike any seen in *Dark Souls* so far. There's a definite puzzle influence on the new areas, from triggering moving platforms and creating new routes out of thin air to *Zelda*-style switch puzzles as you progress further. It's nice to be challenged mentally, and while none of it is especially taxing when taken in isolation, it sure as hell is when compared to the core game. That's not to downplay the mental aspect of the core gameplay, however, especially with regard to online – mind games and mental strength are clearly a core element of duelling, but new elements like these test the mind in an entirely different way, and that's an interesting new direction to explore.

The increased level of challenge will be welcomed by those already 'done' with the main game, and the puzzle stuff is interesting too. We just wish there was a little more in the way of payoff – there's precious little offered in the way of new gear that isn't already outclassed by stuff in the core game. While it's helpful in dodging 'pay to win' accusations, it doesn't exactly feel like a fair reward. But hey, it's *Dark Souls* – perhaps making it through with your sanity, humanity and vanity (Fashion Souls represent) intact is reward enough.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Bandai Namco
DEVELOPER: From Software
PRICE: £7.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN: SKYRIM: DAWNGUARD



AS GOOD AS: DARK SOULS: ARTORIAS OF THE ABYSS

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

FREE FOR ALL: Players who don't own the DLC can still venture into the new areas by placing their summon signs in the large lobby area at the start. A generous and ingenious try-before-you-buy mechanic.



VERDICT 8/10

A PROMISING START FOR THE SEASON PASS



Right: Enemy design just feels intentionally cruel at times, as evidenced by the little critters with Black Gulch poison spitters on their backs. Nope.

TUBE STRIKE

Metro Redux

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PS4
ORIGIN: Ukraine
PUBLISHER: Deep Silver
DEVELOPER: 4A
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Dual-core processor, 2GB RAM, 10G HD
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN


METRO 2033

WORSE THAN


HALF-LIFE 2

This generation, it seems, is all about the last generation. The release schedules have been flooded with remakes and resprays, to the point where the entire concept of a 'next-gen' has become completely muddied.

At least 4A and Deep Silver have the common decency to package both their splendid shooters together, with all DLC, and charge a budget price. Both *Metro 2033* and *Metro Last Light* get the 'redux' treatment here, boosted to 1080p and 60fps on next-gen consoles. *Last Light* appears relatively unscathed on PC, but 2033 has had a complete graphical and systemically overhaul.

Especially as both games are so special. They're not perfect these grim, dread-infused tales of Artyom and his struggles through the post-apocalyptic underground tunnels of Russia, but they do carve the most oppressive of atmospheres. The claustrophobia and subdued melancholy of subterranean life gives way to the toxic choke of the completely uninhabitable surface. It's a game world like no other.

And the work done in bringing *Metro 2033* – hardly an ancient game – up to date is amazing. The stealth systems from *Last Light* have been expertly sewn into the game's mechanics, elevating above its original shakiness. Purists may complain that the raw anachronism of *2033* has been softened, but this is definitely a better game now than it used to be.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

DARK MATTER: Both games have extraordinary lighting. 4A are the masters of gloom.
HIDDEN AND DANGEROUS: *2033* now includes *Last Light*'s excellent stealth mechanics.

Anyway, there are vicious difficulty levels for those that want them. Even on normal, these are tough, uncompromising shooters, but switched up to Ranger, they're masterfully unpleasant. This is a mode where ammo is at a bare minimum; the HUD is non-existent, and the enemies deadly. It's almost unbearably tense and extraordinarily difficult, but it's fantastically well made.

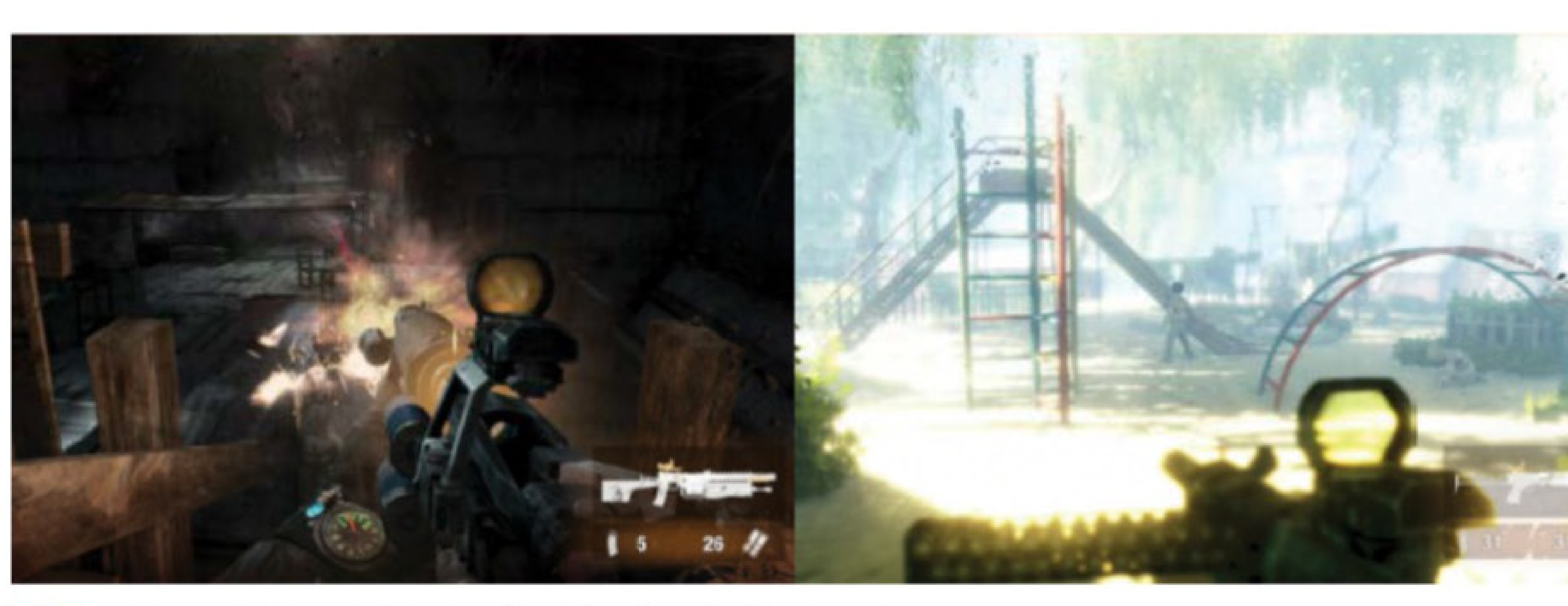
Which is a good way to describe the package as a whole. Despite its humble setup in Ukraine, 4A's engine is a powerhouse. The 1080p treatment looks utterly fantastic, giving *Metro 2033* the visual atmosphere it deserved, and elevating the console versions of *Last Light* on par with the beautiful PC iteration.

At their best, when story, mechanics and unmatched ambience blend in a kind of post-communist maelstrom, these are two of the strongest single-player shooters you'll find. Sadly, both have problems with pacing. Some sections drag, and the less said about the 'sexier' stuff in *Last Light* the better. About as erotic as those nudey pens from the Nineties. Still, the price is hard to fault, the work put in is outstanding, and the games themselves are damn-near essential.



Above: Few games capture the mood, tension and dread of the *Metro* series. They might not be as systematically polished as a classic triple-A product, but they make up for that in ambition and atmosphere.





Above: The pace is broken up by diary entries. They help to keep the player on track with the story, but do damage the momentum of the narrative at the same time.

VERDICT 8/10

MURKY, MENACING, MARVELLOUS. A VERY WORTHY REMAKE

FOR YOUR EYES ONLY

CounterSpy

The most interesting thing about *CounterSpy* is its art direction. The bold contrasting colours and minimalist design elements combine effortlessly to create a genuinely intriguing universe, set in an alternate timeline during the Cold War. The premise is simple – you work for a spy agency, COUNTER, that's tasked itself with preventing the Imperialist and Socialist forces from launching nuclear warheads at the moon: an act that would spin the Earth out of orbit and cause untold damage to the planet. The world's peace of mind rests on your shoulders.

As far as narrative goes, that's it. The rest of the game is composed of procedurally generated levels, and the player can flit between Russian and US bases at will, scouring the top-secret facilities for launch plans that detail the intricacies of the launch plan. Your life bar and the bases alert systems are unified into a singular meter – the DEFCON counter – that raises by one every time you get killed, or begins to slowly raise whenever an enemy raises an alarm. The key to success is stealth – it will both multiply your score (handy when you're directly compared to people on your friends list at the end of every level) and keep the DEFCON down. If either side's alert rating is raised from five to one, it's game over.

With a development team consisting of staff from Pixar and LucasArts, it's easy to see why *CounterSpy* has such lovely animations and such a distinct art style. What suffers, though, is the game's general performance. *CounterSpy* is DynaMighty's first game, and it shows – while not a bad effort, there are some serious frame-rate issues (particularly on the Vita version) and sometimes the AI seems to get confused and walk into a wall until we break their confused necks.

The game is a fun improvised stealth shooter, and the random nature of the levels makes the game power itself with challenging progression, but there's little meat on the bone – once you've played the game for an hour or two, you've exhausted all there is to do and are motivated to play further by little more than the promise of unlocking new plans or formulas – passive perks that can be bought at the start of each level.

We found ourselves playing through to the end just to see each tier of the Imperialist and Socialist military instalments – the game's design is one of its strongest elements (augmented by a great spy-themed soundtrack, too). As it introduces more challenges to sneak/shoot past, the game becomes weighed down by its own insistence on getting hard. It never feels like the difficulty climbs; it just takes longer for you to get things done – enemies won't fall to headshots, cameras can't be broken, gunfights do more damage. It all creates an unfortunate plateau that makes the game taper off into mediocrity after a few hours.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, Vita, Android, iOS
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Sony Computer Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Dynamighty
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

ALPHA PROTOCOL





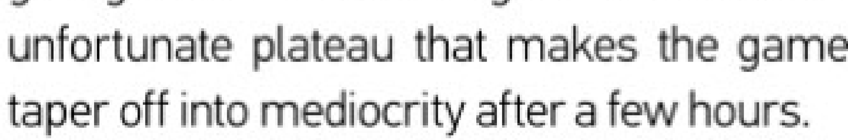
WORSE THAN

GOLDENEYE 64

FINGERPRINT

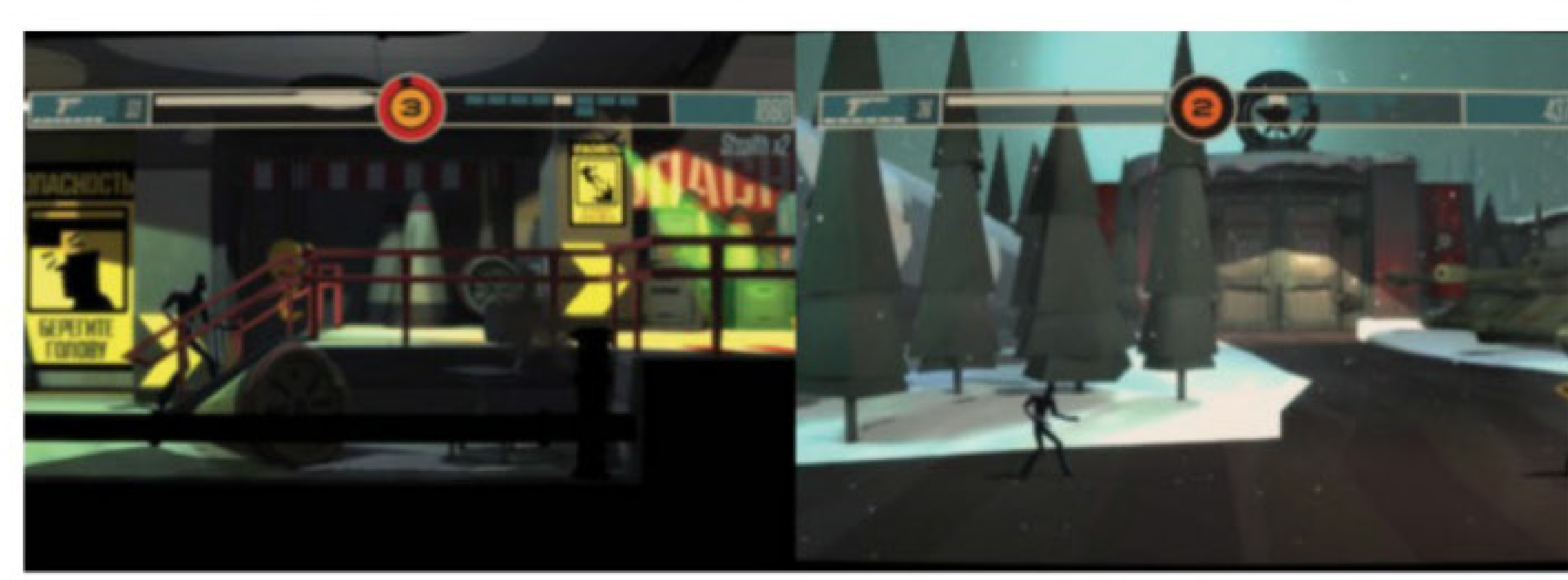
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

BOLD WAR: The Cold War themes are picked apart in a smart and satirical way, with the environmental storytelling filling out the non-verbal narrative beats wonderfully.

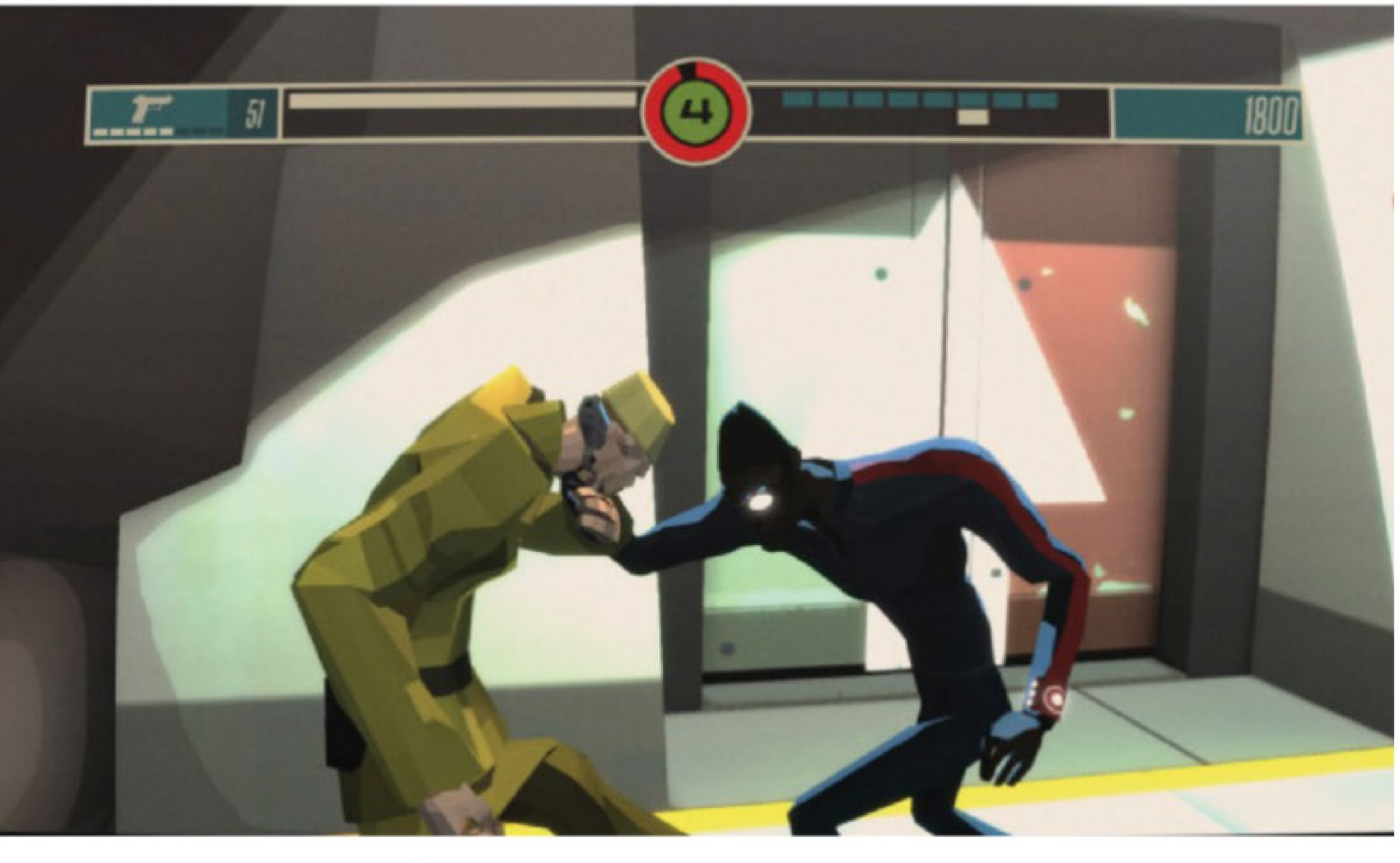


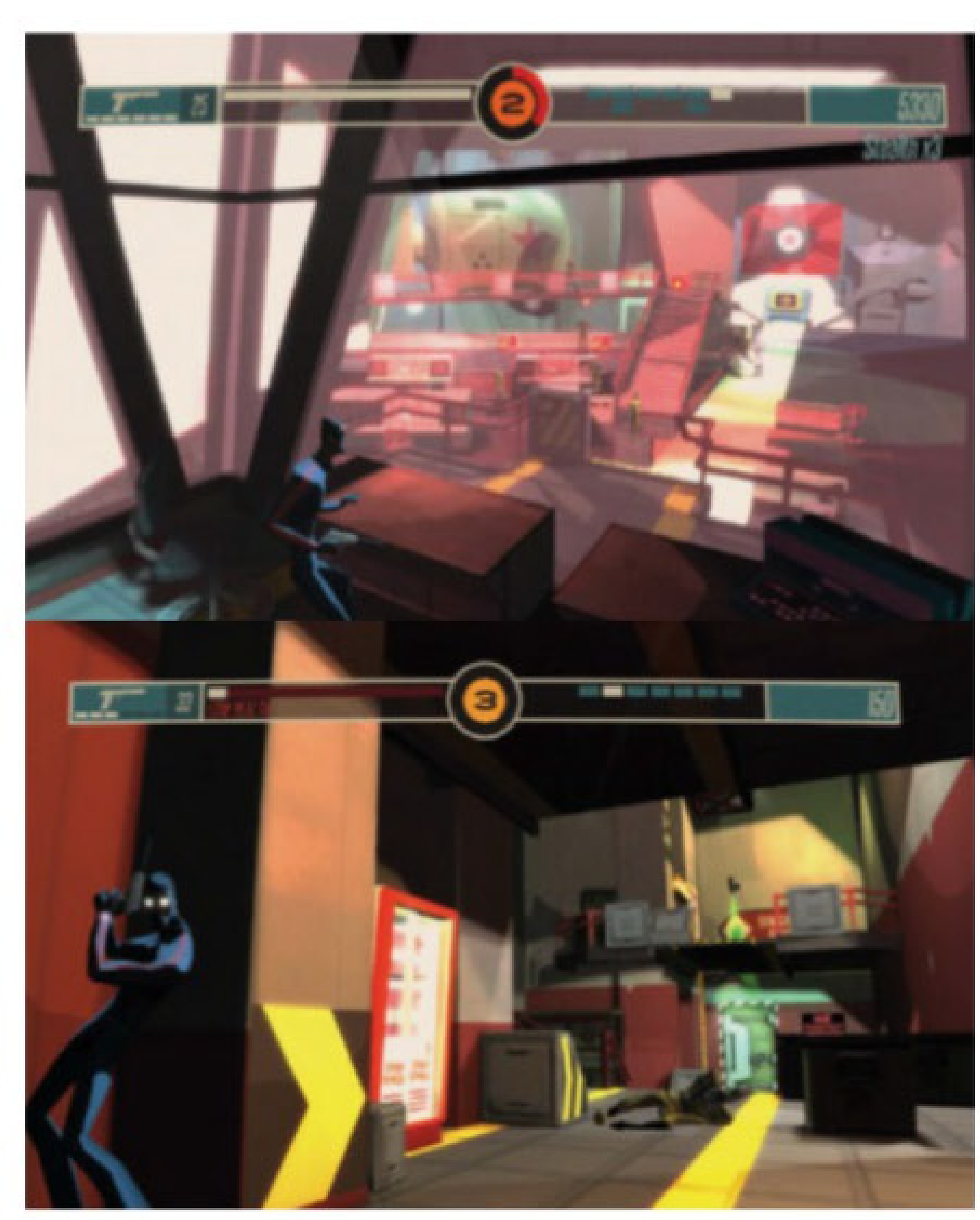
VERDICT 6/10

INITIALLY INTUITIVE AND SMART, SOON BECOMES STALE



Below: There are sections that completely drop the stealth premise in favour of putting you in firefights. These cover-based shooting sections are less fun than the rest of the game's sleuthing.





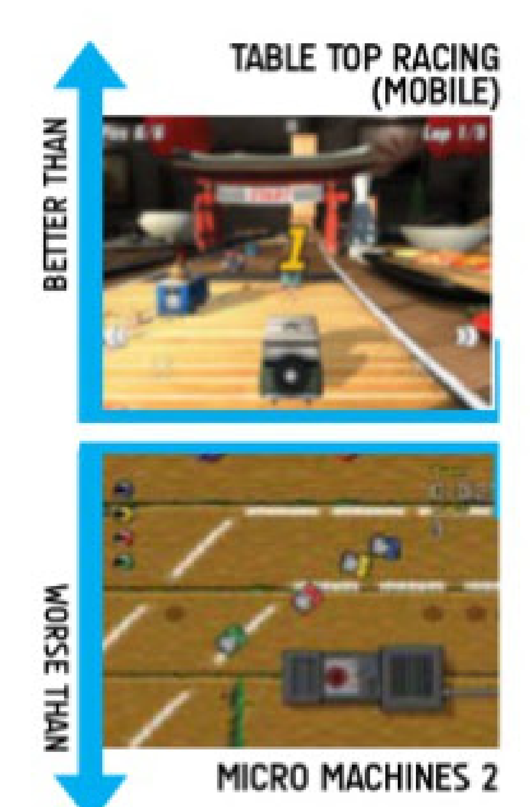
Right: The usually side-on view switches to a more intimate POV when you hide behind cover to help shooting mechanics, controlled by a shrinking radial dial you control with the right stick.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
OTHER FORMATS: Mobile
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Ripstone Games
DEVELOPER: Playrise Digital
PRICE: £4.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

TABLE TOP RACING (MOBILE)

BETTER THAN



WORSE THAN

MICRO MACHINES 2

MICROTRANSACTIONS MACHINES

Table Top Racing

In a bygone era, there was literally nothing more exciting in videogaming than manipulating little cars across makeshift domestic racecourses. Codemasters' *Micro Machines* games dominated the early Nineties, somehow transcending the entire concept of a toy-licensed game and pretty much creating an entire genre in the process.

Playrise Digital, made up of folks who had a hand in the original *WipEout*, is looking to recreate some of that glory with *Table Top Racing*. After a free-to-play launch on mobile, the game comes to Vita with improved controls and a fairly inoffensive price tag of a fiver. You kick off driving a miniature ice-cream truck around table tops, using the right stick as an accelerator and brake. It functions in a similar manner to the enjoyable *MotorStorm RC*, but unfortunately *Table Top Racing* cannot match that game's ingenuity. This is a startlingly simple affair, with almost no skill required to navigate its drift-heavy courses.

There are a ton of event styles to battle through in *Table Top Racing*'s campaign, but very little you won't have seen before. Pursuit, Time Trial, classic races, drifting challenges… it's very predictable. Not that it's necessarily to the game's detriment, but its simplicity and lack of challenge harks back to its origins as a mobile game, where the challenge came from battling its monetary systems rather than its racing mechanics.

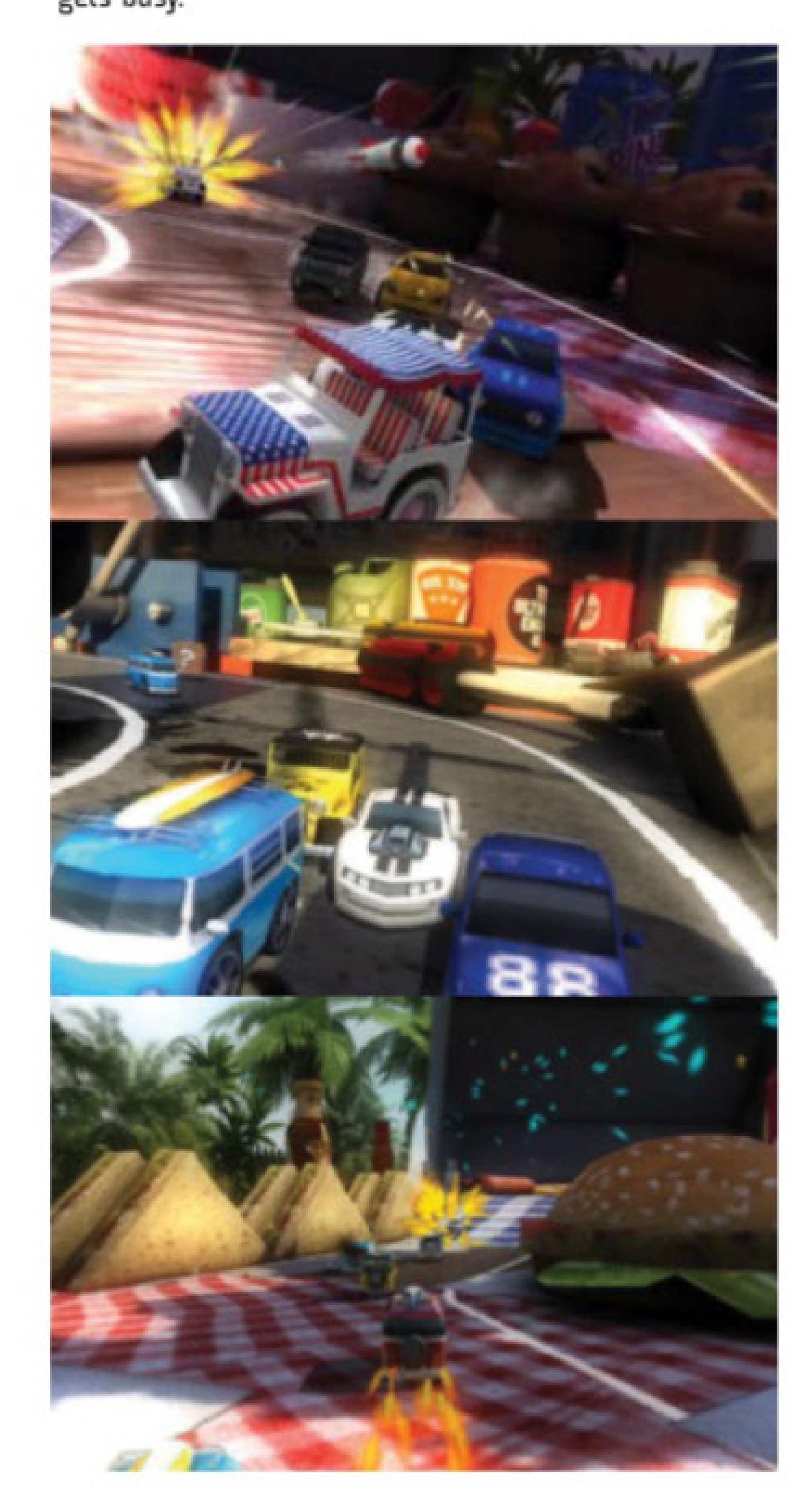
Irritatingly, there are still microtransactions in this version, but you earn enough XP and currency to comfortably upgrade your car (and purchase new ones) just by plodding from race to race. On a console where *Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed* was recently made available for free via PS Plus, it's tough to recommend something as beige as *Table Top Racing*. Some things are just best left on iPhones.



VERDICT 5/10

MEDIOCRITY AND AVERAGENESS INCARNATE

Below: It's a bright and colourful game, but the framerate lets the visuals down when the action gets busy.



DETAILS

FORMAT: iPad
OTHER FORMATS: Mobile
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Wargaming
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: Free-to-play
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: Massively Multiplayer
MINIMUM SPEC: iOS 7.0 or later 701mb size
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

TANK DOMINATION

BETTER THAN

WORSE THAN

WORLD OF TANKS

ADDICTIVE WAR ACTION ON THE GO

World Of Tanks Blitz

Ever wondered how the US interwar prototype, the T1 Cunningham, would fare on the battlefield? Of course you have, and now you can, with over 90 tanks from the US, Russia/USSR and Germany (but not Britain or France, strangely) all playable. *Blitz* is packed with historically accurate detail, so if you're into your war sims, there's a great amount here to sink your teeth into.

As soon as you've booted *World Of Tanks Blitz* up, you're thrust straight into the action, with a minimum of load screens and only a short tutorial. In no time at all, you'll be online aiming your barrel at the enemy tanks, looking to blow them into tiny, tiny pieces. And the war looks great, too; the seven-versus-seven battles are showcased in vivid and colourful environments, a vibrant contrast to the usual dirty brown of war.

Ports from console to mobile can feel like a watered-down version of the original, but this is far from that. There are several options for controller customisation, so every gamer can set their preference. The amount of upgrades for your tank is also impressive, with payable packs available as an option for the gamer that fancies another long slog on the battlefields of Europe. Communication with your squad via Skype is a nice touch, too.

There are still a couple of minor gripes, though. On occasion, the gameplay may be a bit too slow for people looking for a rapid arcade game, but again this is due to the intent on capturing the heady realism of tank-on-tank action, and as such is more a subjective flaw than an objective one. Also a tad annoying is the lack of offline play. Of course, it is an online game, but a basic campaign may have been a good addition when away from the Wi-Fi.

Below: The tank's been destroyed, the team's outnumbered and the base is being captured. It's time for bed.



Below: Choosing the right tank is tricky with the wide choice available.





VERDICT 6/10

FUN AND HISTORICALLY ACCURATE ACTION ON THE GO

A LITTLE LESS INSANE

Crazy Taxi: City Rush





Above: Moments like this are the most satisfying parts of *Crazy Taxi: City Rush*, as they briefly channel the anarchy of the original game. Combo mechanics remain important in building cash, which is the primary currency for vehicle upgrades.

Despite the baggage that comes with using a popular old series to promote a free-to-play game, we can't help but think that *Crazy Taxi* makes a more natural fit than most. After all, 15 years ago you'd enjoy a quick game after a small transaction and see lots of advertising along the way. It's true that the game now limits play time by set intervals rather than skill, and driving people to Pizza Hut was never as invasive as having to watch full-screen video adverts, but that's change for you – it's not the same thing as progress.

Taken on its own terms, *Crazy Taxi: City Rush* is a fun game. It's not a traditional driving game, instead utilising the well-worn runner template popularised by games such as *Temple Run*. Note that we don't say endless, as the game's missions end when you've dropped off all the passengers in a given run. Some of the old *Crazy Taxi* mechanics make a return too, so you can gain extra cash by weaving through traffic and slamming through traffic with the new boost move. The latter is a fine addition, as is the ability to upgrade your cab with the cash you've earned. It's hardly revolutionising the genre, but it's all good fun.

Other additions, such as the new tank-based car crushing game, serve mostly to highlight the in-app purchases. After one run, you'll need to wait over 24 hours for another chance to play. You're also made to wait after advanced upgrades and after every four plays – unless you're willing to pay gems, of course. These are given with relative generosity at certain intervals, such as when you level up or earn certain achievements. It's worth noting that we did lose at least one batch of gems to one of the game's frequent crashes, all of which bizarrely seemed to happen on menu screens.

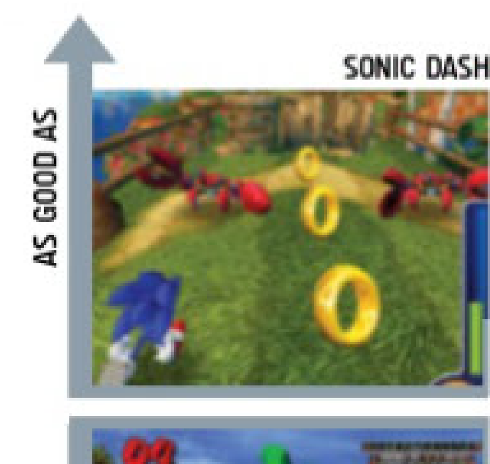
Even leaving aside a business model that is still polarising, there's something not quite right about *Crazy Taxi: City Rush*. It's a fun game, and at its best moments it feels like a *Crazy Taxi* game. But while the game sports bright colours, a punk rock soundtrack and even BD Joe, it removes a lot of the freedoms which elevated the original. Unorthodox shortcuts across rooftops, searching for snorkel-wearing customers in the sea and even the ability to choose your next customer simply don't fit the runner model and have been axed. Ultimately, you can only drive where you're supposed to drive – something we never expected to say about a *Crazy Taxi* game.

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
FORMAT: Android
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Hardlight
PRICE: Free (In-App Purchases)
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

AS GOOD AS

SONIC DASH





WORSE THAN

CRAZY TAXI

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SHORTCUTS: Jumping out of a multi-storey car park is an iconic moment, so capitalise on it.

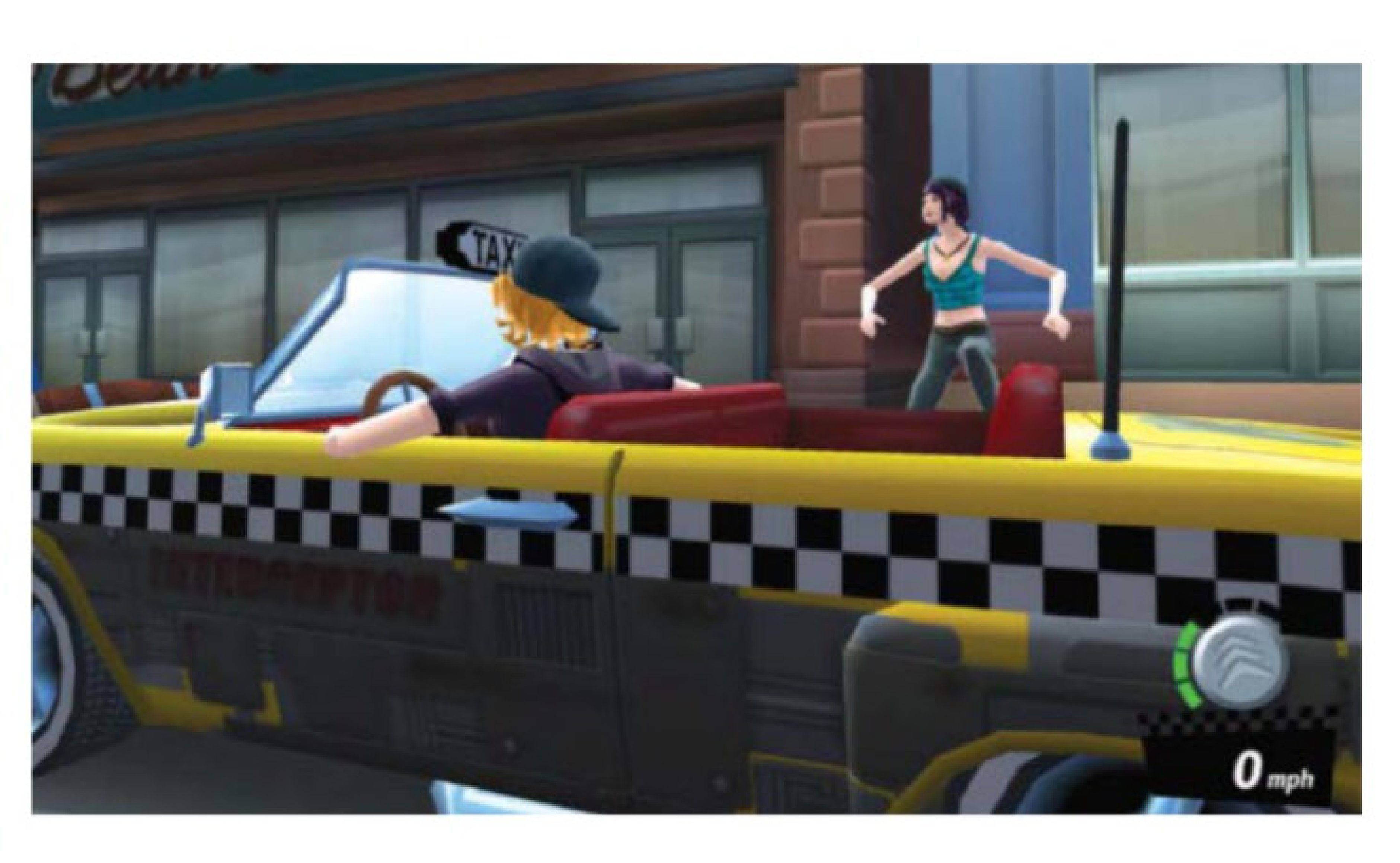
TANK MISSIONS: One of the few compelling additions needs to be highlighted far better.

VERDICT 6/10

A FUN RIDE, BUT NOT A CRAZY ONE

Below: Even when you're driving off-road your cab will follow a set path, able to choose direction only at junctions. The on-rails experience is impossible to avoid, given the runner genre, but causes the game to feel disconnected from the originals.





WEIGH TO GO

Gravity Crash Ultra

If you've ever played the likes of *PixelJunk Shooter* or *Velocity Ultra*, you'll immediately feel a home with *Gravity Crash Ultra*. It exists in a genre that harkens back all the way to *Lunar Lander*, compounding the intricacies of gravitational pull with a player's ability to control directional thrusters to navigate through treacherous cosmic terrain. *Gravity Crash Ultra* brings a high resolution, epileptic neon flavour to the familiar controls of gravity games (particularly *Gravitar*, *Thrust* and *Oids*), resulting in a feeling not dissimilar to what would happen if *Geometry Wars* and *PixelJunk Shooter* ran into each other at full speed and somehow managed to amalgamate.

Gravity Crash Ultra makes use of a gentle learning curve – in the first few levels, you might find yourself getting a little frustrated with how similar each map is, but as you progress through a series of fictional solar systems, the challenge starts being notably amplified. You're launched into an open map on each planet and given a series of objectives – from rescuing stranded spacemen to utter annihilation of enemy encampments. Objectives are paltry, but the point of the game is more to score attack than to play through for any kind of narrative or distinct reason, so the repeated end-points are forgivable.

Each planet is comprised of a tangled network of caves or rocky outcrops, you'll find yourself zipping through space to start with, but soon the levels become choking and claustrophobic – the same point at which the game becomes more of a frustrating slog of careful navigation than a fun gravity-defying exploration. To progress, you'll have to have a good aim to take advantage of the twin-stick controls, as well as being conservative in your use of fuel (if you abuse the thruster, you'll find yourself unable to explore any further). The game is a constant balancing act between fighting off hostile forces, combatting inertia and keeping a close eye on remaining resources. You can refill your depleted reserves, but only at pre-designated caches dotted around the map.

Different ships offer different variations on the basic mechanic – effectively becoming difficulty levels – and a built-in level editor gives you more bang for your buck. The level editor is a little sparse, but is still fun and provides an entertaining distraction from the main game which will – inevitably – become frustrating after an hour or so at a time. Just Add Water has done an incredible job of porting the game to the Vita (it was released without the 'Ultra' suffix for PSP previously) – the production values save it from ever becoming an experience that's too beige, too repetitive. The attention to detail in both art direction and audio design is admirable, and it's decent value for money.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Vita
ORIGIN: England
PUBLISHER: Just Add Water
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £5.79
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE: Leaderboards

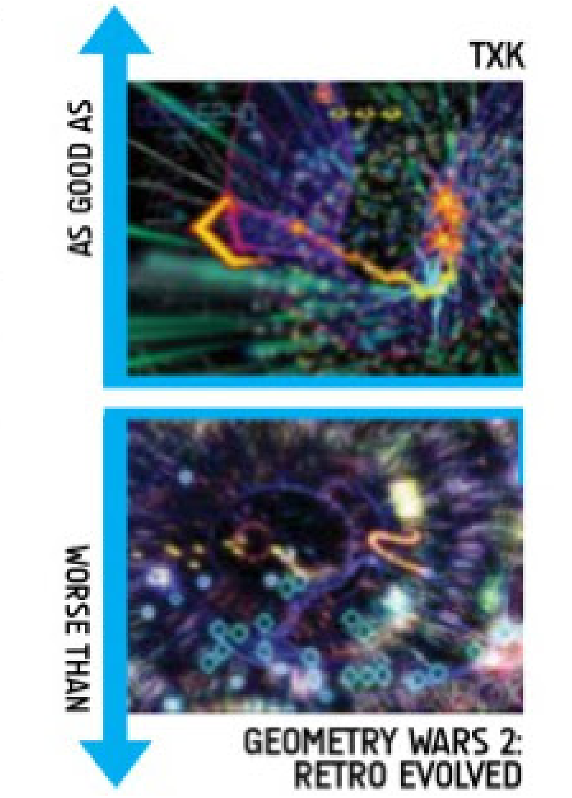


Below: The bosses mix up the game quite nicely, making the game feel more like a twin-stick shooter as a core mechanic than relying too heavily on gravity-based exploration

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

AUTO MOBILE: there's no multiplayer in the game which seems odd to us considering the popularity of co-op elsewhere in the genre.



TXK

AS GOOD AS

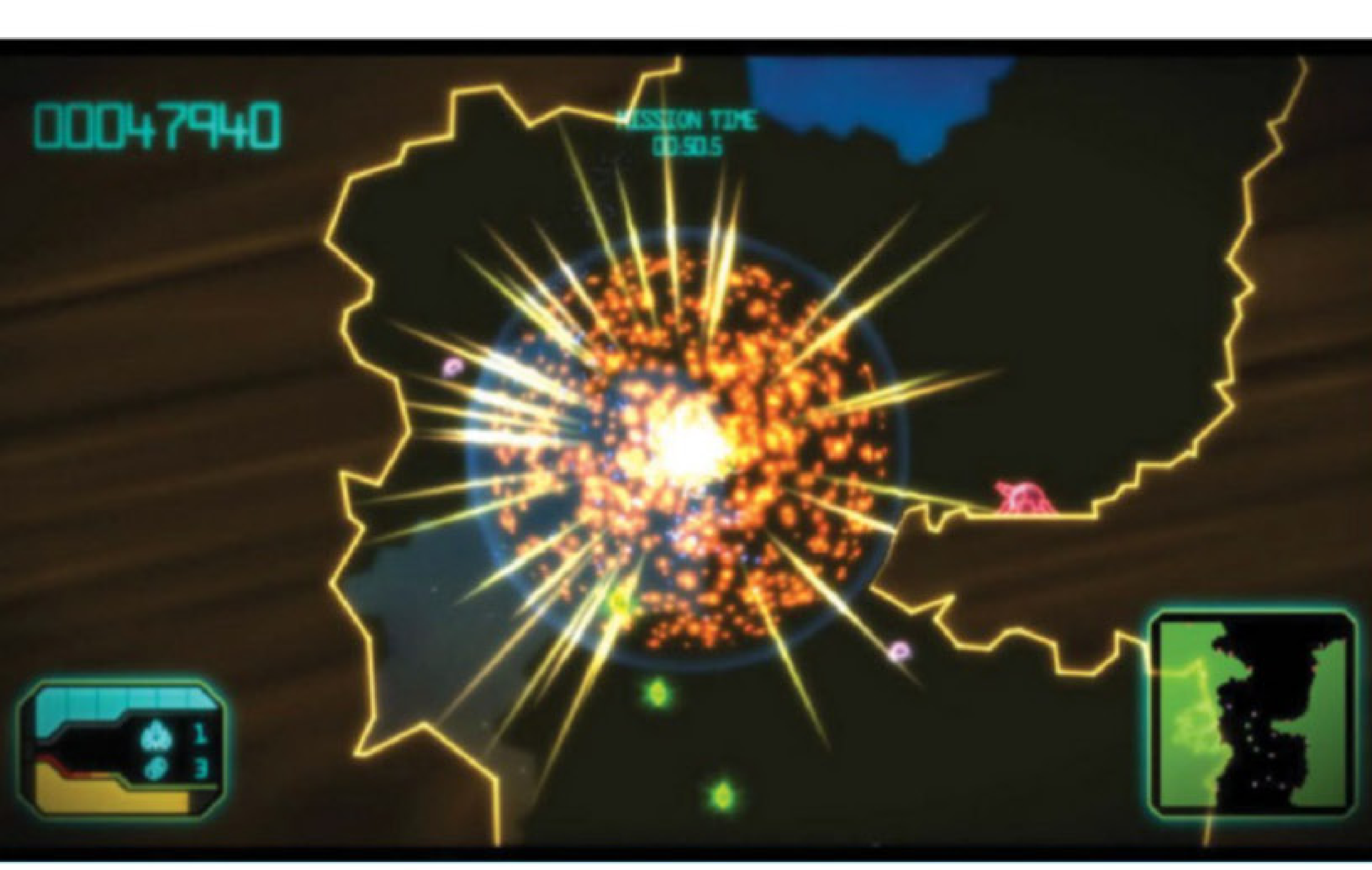
WORSE THAN

GEOMETRY WARS 2: RETRO EVOLVED



VERDICT 7/10

DOESN'T BREAK THE MOULD, PERFECTLY ENJOYABLE



Above: Get used to seeing this screen. A lot. That's you, exploding after you've bumped into enough things to deplete your shield. At least it's pretty, eh?





Left: Ultimate Jutsu attacks are incredibly well designed, capturing the feel of the animated series perfectly. They're also some of the most over-the-top special moves you're likely to see in any game – massive, cataclysmic explosions merely knock people out.

FEEL THE POWER

Naruto: Ultimate Ninja Storm Revolution

When adapting a property as well-loved as *Naruto*, authenticity is the most important quality. It's clear from the outset that the team behind *Naruto: Ultimate Ninja Storm Revolution* is aware of this – as well they should be, having developed four prior PS3 games in the series. As well as new lengthy animation sequences and over 100 characters to choose from, the game's primary story features a new character designed by series creator Masashi Kishimoto, Mecha-Naruto.

It's hard to imagine fans not being excited by all of this. Even if you're not keenly following the manga, it's an easy game to like. The fighting gameplay is easy to pick up, with very simple controls. The system has been improved too, with new counter-attacks and guard-breaking moves added to the mix to include a little more complexity to the timing-based battles. The action is visually exciting, too – pulling off a full combo brings the camera in on your fighter as they deliver the last blow, and the Ultimate Jutsu finishing moves are certainly impressive to behold.

The majority of your time will be spent on the two main modes, Ninja Escapades and Ninja World Tournament. The former presents stories through animated sequences, with occasional battles at key points. The latter changes the format of the game from traditional one-on-one battles to four-way matches in which victory is gained by beating Battle Orbs out of your opponents.

This mode has slightly more gimmicky inclusions, with traps and grind rails around the fighting arenas. It works well, save for a targeting system that felt somewhat unresponsive. A sub-mode in Ninja World Tournament is Mecha-Naruto's story, which follows interactions between our hero and his robotic double through in-engine cutscenes.

It's a solid package, but it definitely carries some flaws. The simplistic fighting action has some scope for developing technique and the new moves have helped, but it still feels a little too simple. Additionally, some of the non-fighting gameplay in the *Ninja World Tournament* is a chore. It doesn't happen too often, but when it does, you'll find yourself wondering why you're being put through the dull things your character has to endure.

Naruto: Ultimate Ninja Storm Revolution is a good game with some welcome mechanical improvements over its predecessors. While it's not likely to satisfy anyone looking for deep fighting action, existing fans will be pleased with what's on offer.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS3
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360, PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Bandai Namco Games
DEVELOPER: CyberConnect 2
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: 12 September
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN: DRAGON BALL Z: BATTLE OF Z



WORSE THAN: JUMP ULTIMATE STARS

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

COMBO VARIETY: There are a few combos for each character, but another attack button would help.
DOING CHORES: Some events let you to befriend other characters, but they're rarely enjoyable.



VERDICT 7/10

NOT REVOLUTIONARY, BUT CERTAINLY FUN



Above: The story scenes will no doubt entertain fans, but they can be a little confusing for outsiders who aren't already familiar with the characters and their affiliations.





Left: The way the camera ducks in and out makes the game feel much slicker – and if you pay attention it will subtly point the way to hidden Mudokons to rescue, too

EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RUPTURE

Oddworld: New 'N' Tasty

It's dangerous to go back and tamper with a classic. *Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee* was one of the defining games of the PSone – not only was it a puzzle-platformer unlike anything the platform had seen by that point, but it was also a striking breakdown of the miserable gulf that exists between those at the bottom and those at the top.

It's reassuring to see that Just Add Water recreated the oppressive Oddworld with such respect. It's the same game, all over, just re-built in the adaptable Unity engine, replace the flip-screens and pre-rendered backgrounds of the PSone version with 2.5D backgrounds and a dynamic camera that weaves together *Oddworld* like never before. While occasionally clunky, the dynamic camera makes the whole game feel much more fluid – even if it does accidentally reveal the secret areas that you'd have to diligently sniff out before.

The graphical surgery performed on the temples of the mid-game now has them flush with life; the inhabiting Paramites and Scrabs lurking creepily in the backgrounds, making the world feel populated and intimidating on every screen. The lush alpine ridges of Paramonia and Nevada-like red rocks of the Scrabania look beautiful, so it's a shame Rupture Farms itself loses something of its atmosphere in the shiny, highly-lit rework.

The puzzles and handling all remain the same, though. Protagonist Abe is an accidental hero – and this feels reflected in his awkward handling. We actually appreciate Just Add Water retaining the heavy, meaty controls the original was criticised for: it makes Abe feel as unsure of himself as you are when guessing at the best way to solve a puzzle, a pitch-perfect blending of mechanic and characterisation.

The GameSpeak function returns, albeit upgraded with more responses to your button-press farts and whistles. There are 200 more Mudokons scattered throughout Rupture Farms, too, and you'll have to use all your puzzle-solving left-field thinking to free them all. With a challenging selection of trophies and achievements – as well as new difficulty settings – complementing the game's already tough core, masochistic fans of the original game are going to find more here than just a nostalgia buzz.

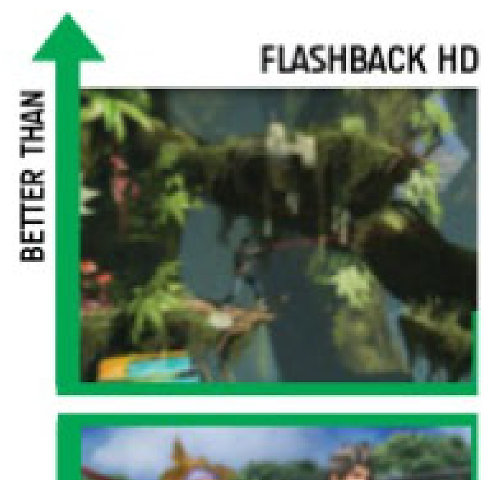
New 'N' Tasty is exactly what it claims to be: a new experience still instantly familiar to anyone that played the original, and vital playing for those that didn't. Oddworld was a defining presence on the PlayStation, and *New 'N' Tasty* will remain a defining experience on the new generation of consoles, too. It's a pleasure to see a remaster done so well.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: PS3, Vita, Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Oddworld Inhabitants
DEVELOPER: Just Add Water
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

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FLASHBACK HD



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FINGERPRINT

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VERDICT 9/10

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Above: The individual temples enact such sense of place and presence, its hard to believe the ideas are over ten years old.







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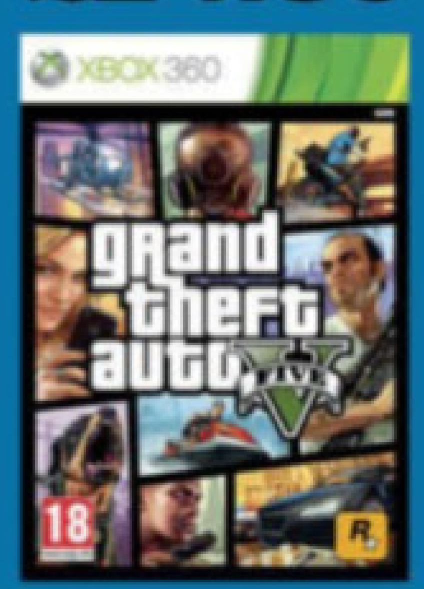
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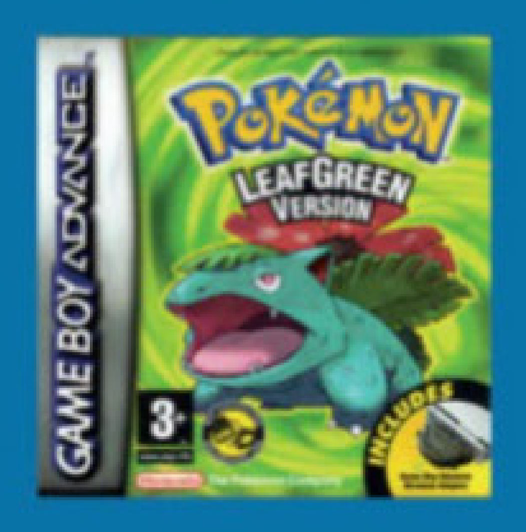
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STARSIEGE: TRIBES

NATHAN VELLA, CO-FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR, CAPYBARA GAMES

"I played Tribes *for about nine years, on a competitive level. I adore it. It was not afraid to let players explore the paths and boundaries of the game –* Tribes *was all about movement, you had a jetpack and could move around with that, but you could also jump down a hill to gain momentum (which became known as 'skiing'). 'Skiing' was a bug – a problem that occurred in the Beta – but because Dynamix wasn't afraid of letting players explore the game, they decided that bug was now a feature. That became central to the game, and it was built into every subsequent* Tribes. *There hasn't been a game since that's required or enforced teamwork to the extent* Tribes *did. It's definitely an inspiration for* Titanfall *or* Evolve *or any of this new renaissance of team-based FPS games. There was some crazy bonkers shit in there, and it was amazing."*

"It's definitely an inspiration for Titanfall or Evolve or any of this new renaissance of team-based FPS games. There was some crazy bonkers shit in there, and it was amazing"

NATHAN VELLA, CO-FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR, CAPYBARA GAMES



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BEHIND THE SCENES

OPERATION FLASHPOINT: COLD WAR CRISIS

Open-ended and ridiculously ambitious, Bohemia Interactive takes us behind the scenes on the FPS that busted out of linear corridors to show off military warfare in open terrain



Released: June 2001
Format: Windows, Xbox (2005)
Publisher: Codemasters
Developer: Bohemia Interactive
Key Staff:
Marek Španěl (Project Leader),
Ondrej Španěl (programming),
Jan Hovera (artwork)
Viktor Bocon (Design)
Ondrej Matejka (music)

WHEN MAREK ŠPANĚL was a teenager, he was arrested by Communist soldiers. Cycling close to the Czech border, where the Iron Curtain separated the satellite states of the Soviet Union from the Western world, his presence was missed by one of the local patrols. He mistakenly strayed into restricted territory near the border, which in Communist Czechoslovakia could reach several hundred-metres wide. Shortly after, he was accosted by an army officer.

"He just shouted at me and asked the soldiers to arrest me and ask me what I was doing there so close to the Iron Curtain – whether I wanted to go to the West," Španěl says. "So I said no and he checked all my personal belongings and found a map. He said 'but you have a map! That's very suspicious. What did you have the map for', so I said 'I'm riding a bicycle, so I'm just using it for navigation'."

The officer marched Španěl home, escorted by soldiers brandishing machine guns. "My parents were scared, of course. Everyone thought I'd done something really bad, but it was not the case."

Aside from a fright, nothing more came of Španěl's brush with the border patrol, but he uses the anecdote to highlight the tensions that defined the surroundings of his upbringing during the Cold War's closing years. "We'd been listening to the voices of the America and we thought Ronald Reagan was a big hero. We really adored Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, they were real heroes for us. We lived in a strange world."

Years later, as founder and co-owner of Bohemia Interactive, this strange world became a central theme of the game that made Bohemia internationally famous, *Operation Flashpoint: Cold War Crisis*.

Released in 2001, *Operation Flashpoint* was insanely ambitious and insanely successful. It offered large-scale, open-ended, combined-arms combat across three massive islands at a time when the majority of shooters were still confined to linear corridors. It sold well over a million copies and continued to sell strongly for the next four years. It even spawned a modding community that, incredibly, is still active thirteen years later. It resulted in not one, but two series of sequels, and is now regarded as the defining example of the military-simulation genre. All this was created by a development team, which at its largest consisted of just twelve people.

Thematically, *Flashpoint* was inspired by a world very different from what we're used to, but in terms of concept and technology its influences are more familiar. Španěl cites examples such as the planetary flight simulator, *Rescue On Fractalus*. Developed by Lucasfilm Studios (later LucasArts) in 1985, *Fractalus* involved saving marooned space pilots who'd crashed on a mountainous planet, procedurally generated using fractals. Another major influence was the 1988 Atari ST game *Carrier Command*, which Bohemia Interactive would go on to remake 24 years later.

The Atari ST was the first console Španěl developed for, creating a hovercraft-simulator game called *Gravon*. *Flashpoint* was originally conceived as a follow-up game to *Gravon*, codenamed *Poseidon*. "[The] original concept was a completely free-roam vehicular action game where things like fuel and fuel stations played an important role," Španěl explains. "Fuel management was one of the things that you had to take care of."

For a long time, infantry combat didn't appear on *Poseidon*'s radar, and when Španěl eventually decided to include it, the result was a far cry from the standard shooter model of the time. "Our initial character control was very much hovercraft-like. So it was a very big inertia of the character. Rotation was very slow, and we kind of felt it's a good thing because it's a simulator, and it's realistic in a sense."

Even the Cold War setting that defines so much of *Flashpoint*'s personality wasn't part of the original design. Instead, the game took place in a post-nuclear war where the majority of the world's landmass had been submerged by rising oceans. "There are only a few outstanding islands on the world where you could survive. Surprisingly, two big contingents of warships, of US and Soviets encounters themselves in this one island. It was called Eden." Španěl laughs at the memory. "Instead of joining forces and trying to survive, they just fought over this last piece of living world."



Flashpoint was always at its strongest when it brought all its elements together in a single mission.

THE FLASHPOINT TOUR GUIDE:

Operation Flashpoint's islands are still remarkable places to visit. Here's **games™**'s handy guide for the virtual tourist

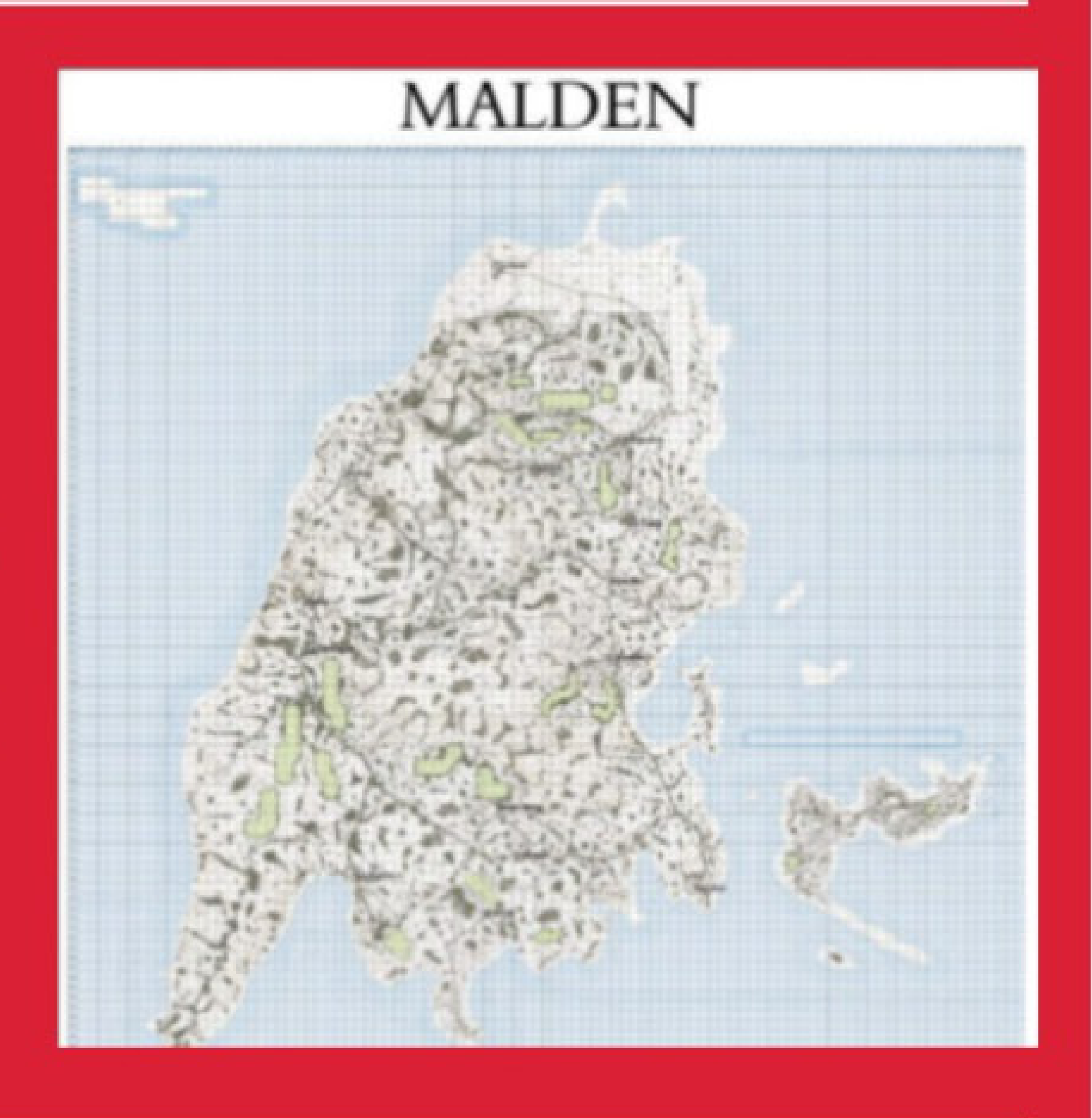
EVERON:

The main map in *Operation Flashpoint* and the one most players will remember (Everon was also crucial to the plot, serving as the backdrop for most of the game). With its dense network of Evergreen forests and quaint rural villages, Everon makes for an ideal destination for the virtual hiker. The major towns include Montignac near the centre of the island, and Lamentin on the West coast, which is known for its impressive sunsets. Plane enthusiasts may find the airfield to the north of interest, while for history buffs a visit to the castle on the Southern coast is a must, although it is worth noting it may be occupied by Everon Resistance.



MALDEN:

Malden is the most Southern island in the chain, and consequently is privy to the warmest weather. This, combined with its pleasant harbour villages, make it an ideal place for beach and fishing holidays. Its largest towns are Larche, Saint Louis and La Trinite to the North West, and La Riviere in the South East. Malden is also NATO's base of operations in the area, meaning that there is plenty of opportunity for friendly conversation with American soldiers on shore leave. A few of the things that you should really watch out for include sunburn, mosquitoes, and the occasional Soviet invasion.



KOLGUJEV:

An arid volcanic wasteland with burned-out towns and nothing resembling human civilisation, Kolgujev is exactly like the real-life Tenerife. There are no large towns on the island, and the majority of the population resides within the many military bases hidden amid its foreboding, mountainous scrubland. Other notable inhabitants include political prisoners and the megalomaniacal General Guba, who lucky tourists may catch a fleeting glimpse of at his magnificent mansion, shortly before being executed for trespassing. What are you waiting for? It's a virtual paradise…



Traces of this idea can still be found in *Flashpoint*. Although Bohemia changed the setting to a real-world scenario, the idea of fighting on islands remained. Indeed, Eden is the military codename used by the American forces for Everon, the first of *Flashpoint*'s three islands.

These vast 3D environments were years ahead of the competition, several square kilometres in size, and sporting incredibly realistic terrain modelling. Like all of Bohemia's environments, *Flashpoint*'s islands were based on real-world locations. The evergreen Everon was based on the Croatian island of Krk. Mediterranean Malden was modelled on the Greek island of Lefkas, and the volcanic landscape of Kolgujev took its terrain data from Tenerife.

"We had no access to GIS data," Španěl says, "So we just took normal printed topographic maps, used a manual grid, and we took the contours and elevation data and created this map by hand. Then pretty much every single object was placed just by hand."

On top of these large and detailed environments, *Flashpoint* sported a forty-mission campaign, dozens of weapons and vehicles each individually modelled, and complex, coordinated team-based infantry combat. It was a tremendous undertaking. It was a huge amount of work for a team that at the time amounted to just six people. "We were very young and inexperienced. We felt anything was possible, basically. We felt there's no boundary that could stop us," Španěl jokes.

On a more serious note, Španěl points out several factors that made the task of building such a game more plausible than it might seem. The first is simple: time. Although Bohemia was a small developer, *Flashpoint* was made over the course of five years, far longer than the average turnaround for a game today.

The second is technology. Španěl notes that building a game like this 15 years ago was technically much less demanding than it is now. "All game assets were much lower fidelity than we are used to in these days, so producing a weapon or character model was nowhere near as complex as it is these days," he explains. "For example, back then you only had one colour texture, and you'd been very limited by polygons, so there was no need to use any advanced techniques like curved surfaces."

Further to that, the construction of *Flashpoint*'s large islands actually complemented the design process for a tactical shooter in a lot of ways. "In most of the games that were about characters back then, you had so-called levels, but we did not have levels. We had a large map and complete freedom to use it," Španěl

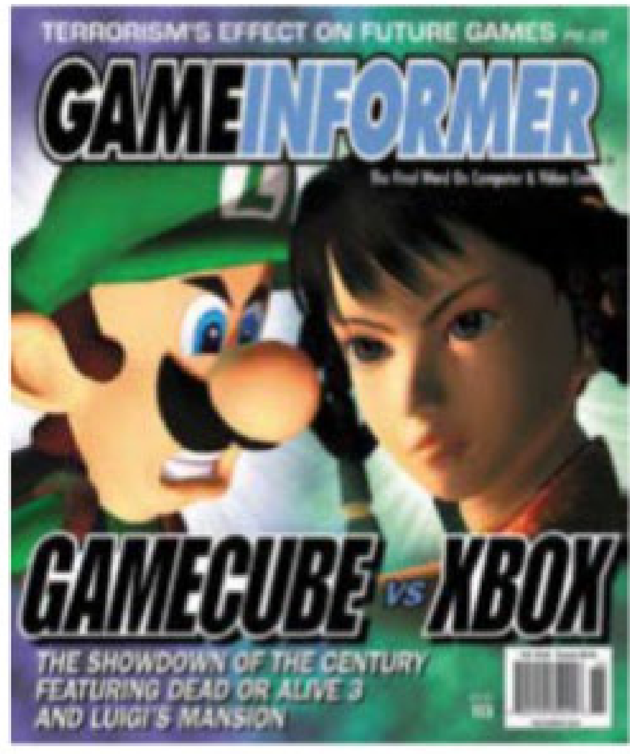


With such realistic environments, players were free to roam the lands at will.

This ain't no exercise, soldier. The commander's in trouble and we can only hope we get to him in time.

Troop transportation really built up the tension, especially when emerging from that confined space, not knowing what you'd be faced with.

WHAT THEY SAID…



"It's so exacting in detail, the Marines are showing interest in using it as part of their training program"

Game Informer November 2001

says. "So for a mission designer, this was really nice because you knew the map already, you'd been working on it for some time, so you could use it freely during mission process."

This is what enabled Bohemia to include such a complex campaign for *Flashpoint*. Again though, what players saw in the final version of the game was nothing like what the team originally had in mind. The initial concept for *Flashpoint's* campaign was something much more procedural and persistent. It was almost like a military *Skyrim*, with patrols of soldiers from both sides prowling around. "After some time, maybe like six months, we realised it's really not that much fun, because sometimes the encounters were rare, so you just walked by and didn't do anything."

In the end, Bohemia abandoned this idea and instead designed the campaign around a more traditional framework of missions, which started you off as a rookie recruit in a training camp, and gradually introduced you to infantry combat, driving, special ops, tanks, and piloting helicopters and planes. "It was a long tutorial with all that the game offers," Španěl chuckles.

This is true enough, but it also does an injustice to the depth of *Flashpoint's* campaign. Individual missions often had multiple layers, objectives would be added or altered as battles would lead to unforeseen consequences. A simple afternoon patrol could turn into a fearsome firefight with special Russian agents. A quiet night by the campfire might transform into a desperate rescue mission as an officer's convoy was ambushed a mile down the road. The campaign even featured a branching storyline, the parameters of which were defined by the outcome of specific missions.

Furthermore, the fact that Bohemia had its setting in place before it started constructing the campaign allowed for a lot of creativity within these missions. "In some cases we had an idea how mission should be structured, but more often we made many versions and attempts at what the mission could be like," Španěl explains. "That was one of the strengths of the game, the built-in mission editor. It was so easy to make a quick mission. So basically, the mission concept in the editor can be made in 15 minutes."

A SIMPLE AFTERNOON PATROL COULD TURN INTO A FEARSOME FIGHT WITH SPECIAL RUSSIAN AGENTS

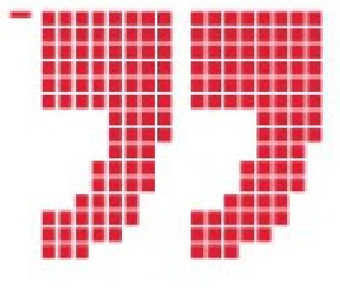
Despite the more standard structure, in parts, *Flashpoint's* campaign approached the original design outline of something more procedural. The final mission was a huge, sprawling creation set across the entire island of Kolgujev, which saw the player controlling a huge special forces team tasked with tracking down the evil General Guba, the game's primary antagonist,

■ *Flashpoint*'s helicopters are much easier to control than those of the *ArmA* games.

WHAT THEY SAID…

"Few games let you play as a soldier, tank commander, and pilot in the same sitting, but in order to enjoy yourself you must be able to feel comfortable with your controls"

PC Gamer



a dissident Russian general responsible for sparking the conflict with the Americans. "It was up to you to basically find the route he's chosen and stop him, arrest him or kill him, or else he could go through and launch the nuke," Španěl says.

Flashpoint even cottoned onto the appeal of survival gaming ten years before the likes of *Minecraft*. Several of the campaign's missions set you alone in enemy territory, with the objective of evading their patrols and traversing the game's sweeping terrain to a safe location. "I really like the mission where you had to find a way from the Soviet prison as the pilot. In previous mission you were shot down," Španěl enthuses.

Perhaps the best example of this, however, is the After Montignac mission. In what is arguably the game's most famous moment, it sees the rookie soldier David Armstrong alone in the woods after a disastrous assault on the town of Montignac, capital of Everon. With all his comrades killed in action, Armstrong must avoid the advancing enemy frontline, including tanks and helicopter flyovers, and make his way across the island to an encampment of Resistance soldiers.

How you accomplished this was entirely up to you, although one amusing approach was to steal a tractor from a nearby farm and gun it past the enemy patrols like a weaponised farmer. What's most interesting about After Montignac, however, is that it was actually one of the campaign's branching missions. "The other one was very rare, so most people played After Montignac," Španěl comments.

These missions were also important in *Flashpoint*'s portrayal of war. Its abrupt brutality and confusing absurdity were juxtaposed against the picturesque countryside that formed its battlegrounds. What's more, the game's dynamic combat systems and realistic representation of health and injury meant that nobody was safe in a *Flashpoint* mission. Whether ally, enemy, or yourself, death in *Flashpoint* was the same for everyone; quick, cold, and shocking. "I felt bad when I killed someone in the game," Španěl remarks simply.

The scale and originality of *Flashpoint* were what

I FELT BAD WHEN I KILLED SOMEONE IN THE GAME

made it initially so popular. What made it enduringly popular were the mission editor and the multiplayer. The former was the same editor that Bohemia used to create the campaign, and its easy-to-use interface created a bustling modding community that included huge websites like the Operation Flashpoint Editing Centre (OFPEC) and OPF.info, a site for downloading *Flashpoint* mods. These sites still exist today. OFP.info even features a new mod for *Flashpoint* created this year, adding Soviet Era Transport Vans to the game.

Španěl still bears fond memories of the *Flashpoint* modding community, who took the framework of Bohemia's creation and expanded it in many and varied ways. "I still remember this, probably my favourite mod for *Operation Flashpoint*," he recounts eagerly. "It was called *Lega Wars*. For legal reasons he couldn't call it Lego. Basically you had *Flashpoint* with Lego-style items, vehicles, soldiers, it was so much fun."

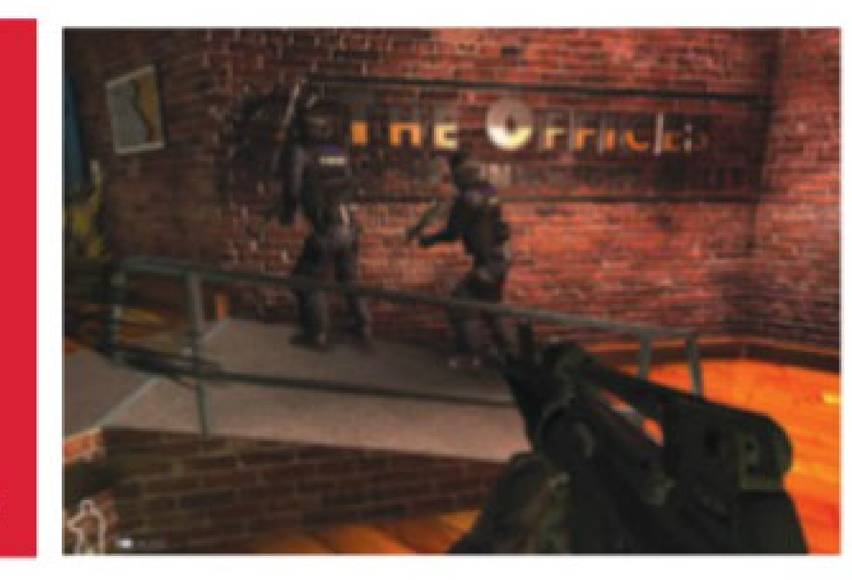
> A GAMING EVOLUTION Rainbow Six > Hidden and Dangerous > Swat 4



One of the first tactical shooters, *Rainbow Six*'s brutal difficulty and in-depth planning spawned a swathe of similar games.



Tactical FPS continued to be popular until around 2005, when cover-shooters like *Gears Of War* came into vogue.





Attending a medic was the only way to heal during combat, if you could bear being touched by the soldiers' freakish hands.

Conversely, *Flashpoint*'s multiplayer is the one part of the game Španěl feels could have been done better. The initial release only featured a couple of basic maps, including a deathmatch map and capture the flag mission. Over time, the multiplayer grew in both quality and popularity, thanks to regularly released patches and the major expansions *Red Hammer* and *Resistance*, alongside community contributions – but it never quite amounted to how Španěl envisioned it.

"There's been so much we wanted to do with multiplayer. So probably *Flashpoint Online*, that's something I regret the most not making, because there was the idea of making a persistent online game for *Flashpoint*. We've never managed to do it, and we focused on the console version instead, which I think was mistake, but back then we thought this good idea."

Operation Flashpoint was enormously successful, both for Bohemia Interactive and the game's publisher, Codemasters, but the success didn't mean a happy ending for the relationship between the two. At the time, Španěl was frustrated by some of Codemasters' actions, such as putting software on the *Flashpoint* disk at the last minute without telling Bohemia.

Thirteen years on, he has mellowed somewhat and admits there were problems on both sides. Bohemia, in his eyes, was very much an indie developer. Ambitious and unconventional, but also unreliable in terms of deadlines, and not always easy to work with. The relationship with Codemasters was formed out of necessity rather than desire. "There was pretty much no way of releasing the game digitally, and there was no way to reach the users without publisher," he says. "So, that made it hard because we always really wanted to be direct with the users, we did not like going much through the middle man, so I think it was probably pretty hard for Codemasters as well."

Yet there is one instance from that era which clearly still stings for Španěl, and that's Codemasters' contractual retention of the *Flashpoint* trademark, and its decision to develop a sequel internally. "When we signed the contract, we never thought – there have been some clauses, but we thought it's mostly to ensure that if we make a sequel, they have some rights to publish it," he explains. "But after few years with the game being so successful, they decided to make it on their own. We never thought about this being even possible, remotely."

After *Flashpoint* and the split with Codemasters, Bohemia struggled financially for several years, saved from bankruptcy only by a rushed release of the first *Armed Assault*, which Španěl describes as a "rescue operation". Ironically, these problems were partly caused by *Flashpoint*'s success. Since Bohemia's ridiculously ambitious creation had paid off dividends, they decided to make the spiritual successor, known internally as *Game 2*, even more ambitious. So ambitious, in fact, that 13 years and three games later, Bohemia still hasn't implemented all the ideas it had for *Game 2*.

Like *Flashpoint*, *Game 2* was supposed to feature three islands. Two of these are the landscapes features in *ArmA 2* and *ArmA 3*, namely Chernarus and Altis, and the third environment is still yet to made. Moreover, Game 2 would include open-world military role-playing, resource management, and player requirements for food and other necessities. It would even sport fully destructible environments. "We originally wanted to make it all in three years," Španěl says, laughing. "After many years we managed to make some of it."

That Bohemia has spent a decade and a half trying to make the sequel it deems worthy of *Flashpoint* shouldn't be seen as a failure. Rather, it's a testament to the brilliance of the original.



Flashpoint's difficulty is generally overstated, but the Spec Ops missions were all punishingly tough.



Tank-spotting – train-spotting for adrenaline junkies.



No *Operation Flashpoint* article is complete without multiple references to the game's tractors.



Tanks for the memory!

THE RISE AND FALL OF



The studio that brought the Birdman into our homes, slapped Bruce Willis on a PSone and kept the Guitar Hero dream alive is no more. We look back at the ups – and downs – of Neversoft

AFTER TENS OF millions of sales, some of the highest-rated releases of all time (at least according to Metacritic) and handling some of the biggest licences in gaming, Neversoft was simply folded up and incorporated into Infinity Ward. True to form, the studio didn't go out quietly, as a cathartic burning of the Neversoft logo-cum-mascot – a skewered eyeball – was hosted outside the studio's office. And that was that. It was a sad end for a studio that, at one point, was involved in titles that pretty much everyone who has touched a videogame had played at some point. In the late-'90s there was hardly a party that went by without someone breaking out a version of *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* – and some years later the same was true, this time with one of the numerous *Guitar Hero* titles Neversoft developed.

But a studio doesn't close for no reason. Its people aren't deemed more of a fit integrated into another, different studio unless there's something wrong. If Neversoft of 2014 was the same Neversoft of 15 years prior, this wouldn't have happened. Because, as with most stories of this ilk, Neversoft was a developer that flew way too close to the sun – and while its ambition and quality of output was rarely in question, it wasn't enough to avoid that plummet.

After 20 years of making games, Neversoft was merged with Infinity Ward. Former staff marked the event by burning the studio logo.

It was different in 1994, when Neversoft came into being. Malibu Interactive was a shrinking studio and Mick West, a programmer at Malibu, was asked by coworker Joel Jewett if he wanted to create a new studio: "It was Joel's idea", West told **gamesTM**, "We were all at Malibu Interactive, and lots of people were leaving to start their own companies, and it seemed like an obvious step. Joel approached me, and I suggested Chris [Ward]."

So it was that the three came together and formed Neversoft – one American (Jewett) and two native Yorkshiremen. "It helped with communication", West laughed, "although Joel couldn't understand what Chris was saying half the time at first." These communication issues didn't stop the new team from grabbing its first contract – a licensed game in 1995, based on the *Skeleton Warriors* cartoon. There's a reason you don't remember the game. Or the cartoon.

It took two years for Neversoft's next project to hit the shelves, and this wasn't even an original creation – just a port of the PC version of Shiny's *MDK*, bringing the shooter to PSone. Then… nothing. Until fate smiled at the faltering studio, in the shape of Bruce Willis and his gurning mug.

Apocalypse released in 1998 to some fanfare – the star power of Willis and the fact it was a decent game meant it sold in the range of half a million copies. Not bad for a game Neversoft had turned around in a mere nine months. "It was originally an internal Activision project with one of its studios", West explained. "They had tried to do something very ambitious with an AI character following you around, [with] big levels and they had this complicated way of building everything.

RIDING SUCCESS

Neversoft's fortunes rode the wave, but was it all smooth sailing?

- SKELETON WARRIORS – 80,000
- APOCALYPSE – 450,000
- TONY HAWK'S SKATEBOARDING – 8,460,000
- SPIDER-MAN – 3,660,000
- TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER 2 – 7,250,000
- TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER 3 – 8,050,000
- TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER 4 – 5,750,000
- TONY HAWK'S UNDERGROUND – 6,470,000
- TONY HAWK'S UNDERGROUND 2 – 4,920,000
- TONY HAWK'S AMERICAN WASTELAND – 4,420,000
- GUN – 2,190,000
- TONY HAWK'S PROJECT 8 – 2,500,000
- TONY HAWK'S PROVING GROUND – 2,100,000
- GUITAR HERO III: LEGENDS OF ROCK – 16,200,000
- GUITAR HERO: AEROSMITH – 4,170,000
- GUITAR HERO WORLD TOUR – 9,870,000
- GUITAR HERO: METALLICA – 2,620,000
- GUITAR HERO 5 – 4,770,000
- BAND HERO – 3,200,000
- GUITAR HERO: WARRIORS OF ROCK – 2,460,000
- CALL OF DUTY GHOSTS – 22,040,000 [Neversoft developed Extinction Mode only]

*All sales figures are approximate, from VGChartz.com

"It wasn't really working out so Activision asked us if we could repurpose some of our stuff that we were, basically, shopping around because we didn't have any work. We took on *Apocalypse* and got it done in about nine months… It was a simple, fun, solid game that made money, and was the first solid step on the road to Neversoft's success."

After that came *the* game Neversoft is known for to this day, *Tony Hawk's Skateboarding* (or *Pro Skater* outside of PAL territories). While it would be a push to say what happened to Neversoft next was luck, there is the admission from West and numerous coworkers that, going into work on *Tony Hawk's Skateboarding*, there wasn't actually much idea as to what the studio was doing. "When we were doing *Apocalypse* we knew we were doing a running-around shooting game", West said.

"We knew how to make people run around, jump and shoot. But skating was very new. It was having an open-ended, a more open-world, a trick system where you could score points. The concepts were alien to people working on the game." But by bringing in the Birdman Tony Hawk himself and with the full support of Activision – whose initial idea the game was – Neversoft ended up creating a cultural phenomenon. It's the worst-kept secret in the history of gaming, but the formula to the original bunch of Tony Hawk's games was their simplicity. "You hold down the X button to crouch and you release to jump. It's very tight, you feel like you're controlling it", West explained. "It's not like you're pressing it and something happens a tenth of a second later… It was fun to simply skate around and jump off things without really doing anything because it felt so responsive."

It was the perfect storm. Skateboarding was the new cool; the game had accessible and fun multiplayer (and compulsive single-player) action and a fantastic soundtrack. The first game sold just under 10 million copies worldwide and topped the charts pretty much everywhere. "It felt very good, because two years earlier the company very nearly closed", West said.

But before Neversoft got to releasing the second *Tony Hawk* game, it had to go about doing another seemingly impossible thing: bringing out a licensed superhero game that wasn't absolute tosh. *Spider-Man* on the PSone was that very game, and using the power of the *Tony Hawk* engine (and judicious use of fogging) gamers were presented with a genuine great. Neversoft could do no wrong.

> "I STILL MEET PEOPLE THAT TELL ME THAT TONY HAWK'S WAS A HUGE PART OF THEIR YOUTH"

This story repeated itself for the next few years, with 2000 to 2002 seeing the *Tony Hawk* series expanded and improved upon in countless ways. The games kept getting better and better, but the increased complexity – along with the general jadedness of an audience seeing the same name on a game every year without fail and skating's fall in popularity – saw the series' sales take a downturn. Neversoft dropped the number and the series was reborn as *Tony Hawk's Underground* – a skateboarding adventure game that allowed players to dismount their board, speak with other characters, take part in an overarching plotline and even drive cars. Oddly, it wasn't terrible. But this generation, even though it was hopped up on skate culture offshoots *Jackass* and *Dirty Sanchez*, didn't buy into *Underground*. It didn't even really *buy* it, and sales continued to fall.

A brief segue into a decent, but forgettable western adventure in the form of *Gun* was all the original, non-licensed output seen from Neversoft in this period. The game was appreciated at the time for offering a pre-*Red Dead Redemption* '*GTA* in the Wild West', but it wasn't a sign of things to come and Neversoft didn't create any more original IP. So the studio went back to *Tony Hawk*, and for the second time there was a rebirth



It's no wonder people were put off the *Tony Hawk* series by *Underground 2* – it decided to put wackyness in the way of fun.


What do you do when a series is stale and you need to revamp it? You add in ridiculous things. Enter *Guitar Hero: Warriors Of Rock*.



of sorts. *Tony Hawk's Project 8* – the eighth in the series, natch – came out in 2006 to criticial acclaim and an enthusiastic response from all those who bought it. But, again, the number of those picking it up had dropped once more. It was clear for all to see that the series needed a huge boost to stay relevant – a true redesign that went beyond a bit of spit and polish. As West admitted: "I don't think things went wrong, but it's hard to innovate indefinitely within a franchise. All great things come to an end, it's just a matter of when."

2007 saw the release of *Tony Hawk's Proving Ground*, which proved to be Neversoft's final shot with the Birdman. But while the series had wavered in quality – and was nowhere near as popular as in its heyday – this wasn't a decision to strip the studio of the licence. No, it was a necessary move to free up resources so Neversoft could focus on its new main project: the *Guitar Hero* franchise, which the studio had been working on since 2006.

It was a peculiar coming together that foisted the peripheral-based shredding simulator into the hands of Neversoft, with the story going that Jewett met RedOctane's founders at E3 in 2006 and told them of how the first *Guitar Hero* game had got the team through some stressful times while creating *Tony Hawk's Project 8*. That was all the founders needed to hear – Neversoft was a studio with a proven record of quick turnaround and high-quality games. It wasn't actually as strange a decision to



Hidden characters galore in the *Tony Hawk* games of old – and not a microtransaction in sight.



The licensed *Guitar Hero* (and *Rock Band*) tie-ins haven't been bad, on the whole. *Metallica* was a particularly good one.



Well before *Red Dead Redemption*, *Gun* moseyed into town around the launch of Xbox 360. It was decent but unspectacular.

NEVERSOFT'S FIVE BEST

Even though consistency was the studio's hallmark, there are still a few standout titles…

TONY HAWK'S SKATEBOARDING

1999 [PSone, N64, Dreamcast, Game Boy Color, N-Gage]

Skateboarding was already popular, people already knew who Lagwagon and Dead Kennedys were and skating games had been released before. But somehow, *Tony Hawk's Skateboarding – Pro Skater* outside of PAL regions – felt like something completely new. A total game-changer.





SPIDER-MAN

2000 [PSone, N64, Dreamcast, PC, Game Boy Color]

You have the *Tony Hawk* engine, you want to make something else. What do you do? Make a Spider-Man tie-in, obviously. Better than that, you make a *brilliant* Spider-Man tie-in. It wasn't as open as later games – and oh god, the fog – but Spidey's Neversoft adventure was undoubtedly great.



TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER 3

2001 [PSone, PS2, Gamecube, Xbox, GBC, GBA, PC, N64, Mac]

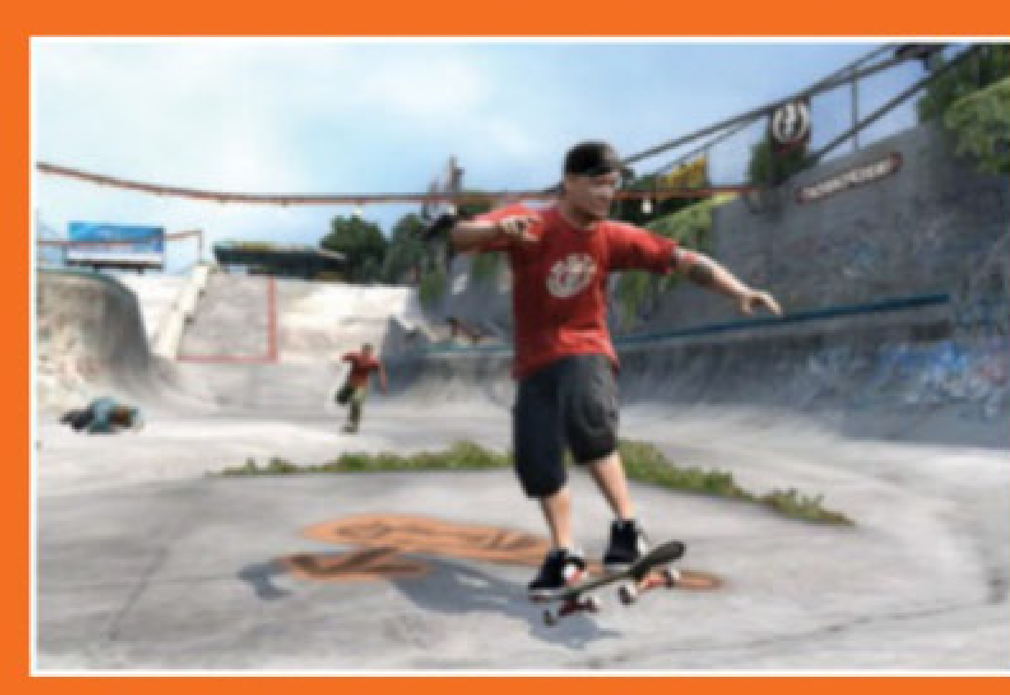
Every game based on the Birdman brought something new, but the revert in *Pro Skater 3* changed the combo system forever – and the *Hawk* series with it. Now combos could be *ridiculous*. And that increased the fun quota by 900 per cent.



GUITAR HERO 5

2009 [PS2, PS3, Wii, Xbox 360]

It took Neversoft a few tries to get to grips with what was originally Harmonix's baby – but when it did, it did it *hard* (rock). *Guitar Hero 5* was a brilliant mix of the fantastic, established mechanics with refined and improved elements everywhere else. Just don't mention the whole Kurt Cobain thing.



TONY HAWK'S PROJECT 8

2006 [PS2, Xbox, Xbox 360, PS3, PSP]

Tony went off the rail for a few years, but *Project 8* brought back balance to the grind. The magic of the originals was long gone, but there was a back-to-basics approach that resonated with players old and new. And it was a lot better than sequel *Proving Ground*.



hand *Guitar Hero* to the studio as it might have seemed at the time.

But while the team at Neversoft hit the ground running as they often did, managing to get *Guitar Hero III: Legends Of Rock* out in the same year as *Proving Ground*, there was stiff competition from the get-go: *Guitar Hero*'s original developer Harmonix brought the much-more technically accomplished *Rock Band* to market less than a month after *Guitar Hero III* hit. Immediately Neversoft's game looked – and felt – outdated.

Over the next few years it was hard to shift this perception, with reviewers and online commenters alike voicing the opinion that Neversoft's games just weren't up to the standard the Harmonix team was putting out. But none of Neversoft's initial *Guitar Hero* titles received a bad score and sales were, well, *phenomenal*. *Guitar Hero III* was, according to Activision, the first game to bring in over a billion dollars – and it racked up sales figures of around the 16.2-million mark.

So it was that Neversoft stopped being the *Tony Hawk* studio – that franchise was passed on to RoboModo, where it became another peripheral-based game and absolutely tanked before being euthanised with extreme prejudice. Neversoft instead became the custodian of a different yearly franchise – but this time around, things didn't get better and better as they went along.

Sales for *Guitar Hero* dropped for the fourth main game, *World Tour*, to around 10 million – and they never got that high again. While public opinion had warmed to Neversoft's approach for 2009's *Guitar Hero 5*, the sales didn't reflect this – and when *Warriors Of Rock* released in 2010, shifting around 2.5 million copies, Activision wound up its *Guitar Hero* wing and shut down the one-time world-leading franchise. Neversoft was, through no fault of its own, without anything to make.

There hasn't been a full game released with Neversoft's badge on it since that last-ever *Guitar Hero*, and the studio was pretty much forgotten by gamers across the globe – no longer a name synonymous with joyful parties, now just a name only ever said after the words 'whatever happened to…' It surprised a number of people to see Neversoft's involvement in *Call Of Duty: Ghosts*, but its contribution – in the form of the alien-blasting, *Left 4 Dead*-aping Extinction mode – was excellent and a highlight of an otherwise formulaic game.

"APOCALYPSE WAS A SIMPLE, FUN, SOLID GAME THAT MADE MONEY, AND WAS THE FIRST SOLID STEP ON THE ROAD TO NEVERSOFT'S SUCCESS"

Eight months after *Ghosts*' release, Activision announced it was bringing Neversoft into the Infinity Ward fold as a result of its stellar work on the *COD* title. It wasn't as swift a death as studios have experienced before under the big publishers, but it still saw a bittersweet ending to one of gaming's fallen kings.


With all that came to pass – and West leaving the company in 2003, before the *Gun* and *Guitar Hero* years – it was still good to hear he was proud of what Neversoft had done. "[I am proud] that we created a new genre of games and set new standards for gameplay. I still meet people all the time that tell me that *Tony Hawk's Skateboarding* was a huge part of their youth. That makes me feel proud."


Bottled lightening. We're unlikely to ever see another studio like Neversoft, seemingly making it up as it went along and striking very big indeed, being handed the keys to one of the biggest publishers' biggest licences and ending up an atrophied shadow of its former self. But it's not a sad story – it's pure punk rock: just the way Neversoft would have wanted it to be.



Image: Mick West

In 1998, Chris Ward, Mick West and Joel Jewett (the three sitting in the middle) had the world of gaming at their feet. And Ward had a wedding to get through, as this image from him shows.


RETRO



BEST BOSS

TREASURE HUNTER G

SNES [SQUARE] **1996**

■ MARKING THE END of a fruitful partnership between Nintendo and Square, *Treasure Hunter G* is a SNES-exclusive turn-based RPG that (like so many of its ilk) never made it out of its native Japan. But that doesn't exclude it from celebration, as anyone with a savvy head about them will be able to find a translated version online. Among the deluge of memorable imagery packed inside the SNES cartridge, it's the final battle that stands out as an artistic (and somewhat disturbing) highlight. A fire-breathing reanimated dinosaur skeleton is always going to grab a gamer's attention, but it's the smaller details of design that create the biggest impact; from the fur wrapped loosely over its bones to the throbbing organs beneath its ribcage, it's one of the most horrific creations from the studio in its early years. Make no mistake, the Bone Dino is Square at its darkest.







RETRO

INTERVIEW

HAIL! HE'S STILL CRAZY

Kenji Kanno is the man behind one of arcade gaming's true greats: Crazy Taxi. We sat down with the Sega stalwart for a good long chat

While he's worked on one other title (1997's arcade-only *Top Skater*), it's fair to say Kenji Kanno is seen as a one-series man. He's the mind behind the original three *Crazy Taxi* games, as well as the PSP spin-off *Fare Wars* and the latest in the series – a free-to-play smartdevice version known as *City Rush*. Other than that, Kanno hasn't been directly involved in the creation of a game – so it's a uniquely interesting experience to speak to the man. We did just that, trying to find out what he thinks of the series he has created and what he thinks of its lasting legacy with gamers.

Why, after all this time, have you suddenly decided to bring us a new version of *Crazy Taxi*? Despite the perpetual popularity of racing games (and specifically open-world ones), it seems like the revival of Crazy Taxi has come out of the blue…
I had been thinking about it a while and wanted to try something new in the *Crazy Taxi* series. At the same time I had a chance to have a conversation with Haruki Satomi – he's currently the CEO at Sega Networks, but I spoke to him before he was CEO and he told me he wanted to bring *Crazy Taxi* to a smartphone platform. I've been working with Hard Light Studio in the UK, where *City Rush* was born.

Had you had something in mind for a long time with the franchise, or was it more of a spur of the moment thing?
A couple of years after *Crazy Taxi 3* was released I tried something different [*Fare Wars* on PSP], but after that I got feedback from various people that they really enjoyed the original *Crazy Taxi* games. So I started thinking about what I could create that would be new, to surprise people and bring enjoyment to them.

Would you agree that smartphone and tablet gaming bears a huge similarity to arcade gaming, with their focus on quick, casual play and so on?
There is a similarity between smartphone titles and arcade games – you can play the game for a short time, enjoying it very quickly and casually.

MY METHOD OF CREATION IS TO DECIDE THE MUSIC TRACK I'D LIKE TO USE IN A GAME BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE

Why do you think the *Crazy Taxi* series is so enduring and popular? What is it about the game that people love?
It's fairly difficult to answer that, because I was in the middle of it all on the team who created the game. So it's hard to answer why it has been loved by fans for such a long time. As well as the music on the soundtrack, the style of game was very new, making it very well accepted – that's probably one of the reasons why it has been loved for such a long time.

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHT

"It's odd to go back to 1999 and think there hadn't been anything quite like *Crazy Taxi* before – it just seems so obvious in hindsight: a super-fast, super-silly game where you pick someone up and go from point A to point B as quickly (and safely) as possible. Simple, straightforward, surprisingly elegant (even if crazy), *Crazy Taxi* lit up the arcade scene at the end of the millennium."

KENJI KANNO – ON CRAZY TAXI – ARCADE



Craaaazy jumps were often necessary to find shortcuts and more importantly, they were bloody good fun.

What was the attitude that you brought – the thinking behind the original game?
It's a bit of a philosophical answer, but in the end, play is providing or receiving the stimulation of fun. If you get the same stimulation over and over, you'll get bored, so my focus was to think about how I could give new stimulation to users who play games. So that's why it was sort of a collaboration between the music and the new game design… I was focusing on creating new ways to stimulate for fans and people who play.

Of everything you created with the first game, what is it about *Crazy Taxi* that makes you the proudest to look back on?
I get the chance to speak to people like journalists who speak different languages and come from different cultures, and I get the chance to get positive feedback on the *Crazy Taxi* games I created. I feel slightly awkward – in a positive way – and at the same time I feel happy and glad to receive such positive feedback. When I visited the United States and had a chance to speak with developers in America and hear they liked *Crazy Taxi* – I felt the same way: awkward, but happy and glad. Hearing it from people who don't speak Japanese… it just makes me feel happy.



Crazy Taxi 3 wasn't quite as well-received as the previous two in the series.

So do you still have the same passion for the series as a whole?
Of course!

Looking back at the core trilogy, how do you feel with the benefit of hindsight?
When I look back at the series I feel creating something is difficult – in both a good and bad way. Also if I look back now I think, because it's the *Crazy Taxi* series, you have to hold onto something. But more than holding onto something existing, it's more important to have the courage to break something and create something new. That's more important to me now, looking back.

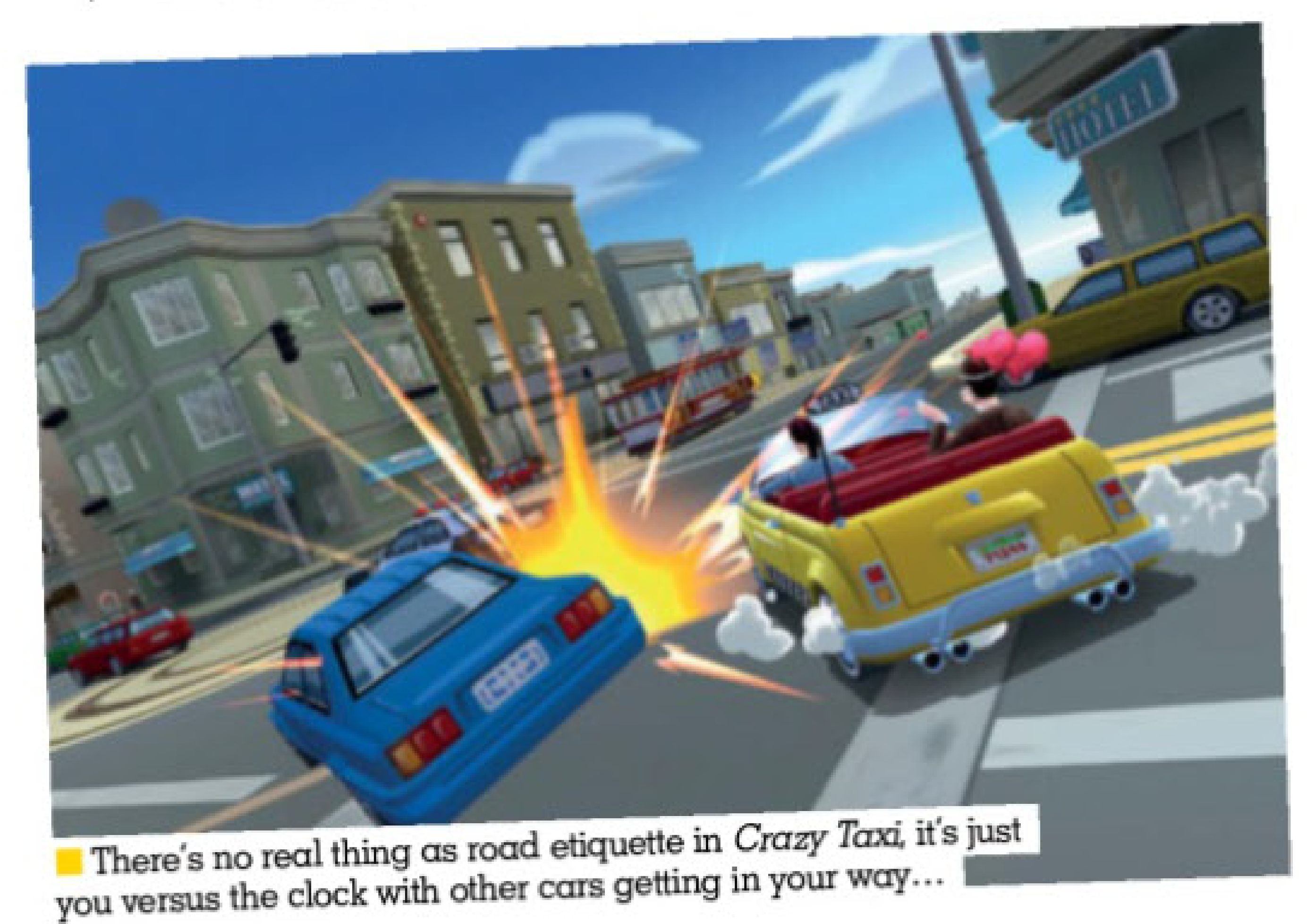
Is there anything in the first three games that you'd want to go back and change?
If you look at *Crazy Taxi 1*, *2* and *3* specifically, there isn't that much I reflect on where we should have done something differently. When I wanted to have some features in each title, they always came from very deep in my mind and so I always felt I had done the best I could. Having said that, there are two things I wanted to actually change – one; multiplayer, and two; transition between day and night that affects gameplay – passenger attitudes, the whole atmosphere would change when time transitioned. I couldn't put those elements in the game for previous titles.

When you first had the idea for *Crazy Taxi*, was it easy to get Sega on board?
It wasn't that hard, because my boss was very cooperative and open to creating prototypes at the side of main projects. But I think my boss must have had a difficult time to present such a new concept to board members and management, to get through that and get a greenlight.

Of the titles released – not including *City Rush* – which is your favourite *Crazy Taxi* game?
If I'm asked that question, of course I'll say I love every game equally. But having said that it's not to do with me liking or disliking certain games, but without a beginning, the series doesn't have anything – therefore the first one was important to me.

Have you ever wanted to branch out and make different games?
Of course I'd love to make something different. If I have got nothing I would like to create, I will stop being a developer. But of course I have something!

Are you happy with how the series is seen by gamers?
As the creator of the game I purely feel glad and happy to receive such feedback from fans and users. There are some products that aren't discussed or received well, but *Crazy Taxi* has many people discussing it and it was received very well – this was very fortunate and it makes me very happy as a creator.



There's no real thing as road etiquette in *Crazy Taxi*, it's just you versus the clock with other cars getting in your way…

You're something of an elder statesman in the industry – what are your feelings on the state of modern gaming from a developer's standpoint?
I have a feeling that something interesting will happen – that's the feeling I get from the current state of gaming. In the past, there were clear lines – this is arcade, this is console, this is something else – there were clear lines between each section. However, now there are fewer boundaries and it feels more like something new. Of course, there are chances you might fail, but at the same time there are more chances than ever to succeed. Also, creators and consumers are more flexible than ever – so generally speaking I think something interesting is going to happen in the future of the gaming business.

Did you have to consider this flexibility when you were making *City Rush*?
I think the most important thing is to have a solid idea of what I'd like to deliver, what emotional reaction I want from players. For example, when you think about giving a present to your partner, you think 'how can I please them?' Should you send a text? An email? A letter? Go see them in person? But the essence is the same – the most important thing is to have a solid idea of how users like to have fun and how I'd like them to experience it emotionally. From a business point of view, the way the company charges is different, it's changing, so it could be from a customer, it could be from elsewhere. Companies get smarter, but the most important thing in a game is having a solid idea of what kind of feeling you want to deliver to users.

What have you found to be your main inspiration for your games?
I watch drama a lot and I try to read a lot of books – usually Japanese novels – and I watch anime, and read manga. They're my main inspirations. Out of those things, other games are probably the least of my inspirations!

In the UK, the arcade industry is all but dead. Being as involved in some of its best days as you were, how does this make you feel?
The way people live is so different to how it was a while ago – a long time ago there were no mobiles, so people had to contact each other on landlines, but just like that changed, arcades have to change, too.

THERE ISN'T THAT MUCH I REFLECT ON WHERE WE SHOULD HAVE DONE SOMETHING DIFFERENTLY

But the arcade is where people can communicate in person, physically, so it's important to think of something new that can fit into how people live these days, into the environment. I'd like to create something new to fit into that new arcade environment.

And what's it like working with a British studio (Hard Light Games)?
It is very interesting working with British developers. The most interesting thing, I thought, was how the British team thought up new ideas I didn't think I could have come up with. British developers think in a similar way to Japanese – it's inspirational. Hard Light is British, but I have worked with a US studio before – I found it interesting to see the difference between how US and UK studios work.



DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHT



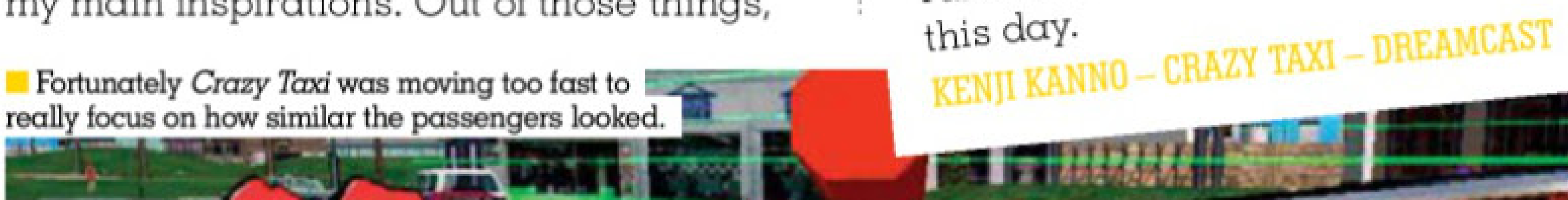
"We were still in the period where something considered 'arcade perfect' was a rarity, but *Crazy Taxi* on Dreamcast was everything we could have hoped for and a bit more too. It's the game that played out as the background to a million parties around the world back in 2000. With the addition of a new stage to explore, mini-games and customisable rules, it still holds up brilliantly to this day."

KENJI KANNO – CRAZY TAXI – DREAMCAST

Is it easy to keep the core experience familiar to gamers when you're working with these studios that have difference working methods?
No matter if the development team is based in Japan, the UK, wherever, it's always difficult to create something. The most important thing is to share ideas and why each person thinks in a certain way, why a certain person thinks a process would work in a certain way. Matching up those ideas between each party is the most important part, so the overall approach has everyone on – more or less – the same page.

One thing everyone wants to know: is *Crazy Taxi* coming back to console?
I get that question all the time from journalists, so now my internal gauge is gradually increased. Such feedback about bringing *Crazy Taxi* to console – if I get more feedback like it – will fill up the internal gauge, and when it reaches maximum it'll come!

And finally, who chose that iconic Offspring track for the original game?
I did. I chose The Offspring and the soundtrack to use on the original *Crazy Taxi*. First, I loved that music. Second, originally I wanted to create an action game. For action games it's important to have the right tempo and rhythm to match up with gameplay. So for *Crazy Taxi* it's a game about driving around a city in a crazy manner… My method of creation is to decide the music track I'd like to use in a game before anything else. With the action game, the city, that kind of tempo in mind, I went to record shops like Tower Records and listened to a lot of music, bought a lot of CDs. Out of all those I thought the Offspring and Bad Religion tracks suited my mental image best.





Fortunately *Crazy Taxi* was moving too fast to really focus on how similar the passengers looked.

GAME CHANGERS

GRAN TURISMO

Released: 1998 **Publisher:** Sony **Developer:** Polyphony **System:** PlayStation



Each car in the original *Gran Turismo* has a polygon count of 300, whereas *Gran Turismo 5* utilised a whopping 500,000 polygons for the premium-level vehicles

In an era where arcade racers were king, Sony went down a different route and ushered in the dawn of true simulation racing games

EXITING THE PITLANE late in 1997, nobody could have predicted the impact that Polyphony Digital's *Gran Turismo* was going to have on the racing genre, not just on the then contemporary PSOne but also on Sony's follow-up consoles. A labour of love by Polyphony's visionary, Kazunori Yamauchi, *Gran Turismo* introduced virtual racers to a whole host of features rarely seen on console games before, producing an experience that still lingers long in the memory, thanks to both the original game's success and its pivotal role in creating the formula for later games in the series.

Beaten to the European market by Codemaster's exemplary *TOCA Touring Car Championship*, *Gran Turismo* was up against stiff competition on the starting grid, yet where *TOCA*'s graphics, fully-licenced championship, damage, and handling had wowed us in November 1997, *GT* suddenly changed the boundaries when it was released to European gamers in May 1998.

On first startup, the menu design seemed confusing and mildly uninspiring, yet these underwhelming emotions were quickly washed away when you realised the breadth of automotive exotica on offer to drive. Over 140 cars sat waiting for their turn with you behind the wheel, all officially licensed versions of their real-world counterparts. By today's standards it may sound rather lacking in variety, but before the turn of the millennium, never before had such choice been offered to motorsport enthusiasts.

If that ample selection of chariots wasn't enough though, *Gran Turismo* also introduced us to a range of performance upgrades. Exhausts, engine components, and tyres could all be modified to boost your cars' performance. What's more, aftermarket wheels from a range of real-life brands could be fitted, along with a small selection of Japanese tuner-style rear wings to help customise the look of your fleet, long before the *Need For Speed* franchise offered such extensive in-game services.

OFF FOR A SPIN | GRAN TURISMO SPAWNED ONE OF SONY'S BEST EXCLUSIVE FRANCHISES, WITH SUCCESS FROM THE SCREEN TO THE TRACK OVER THE LAST 17 YEARS.



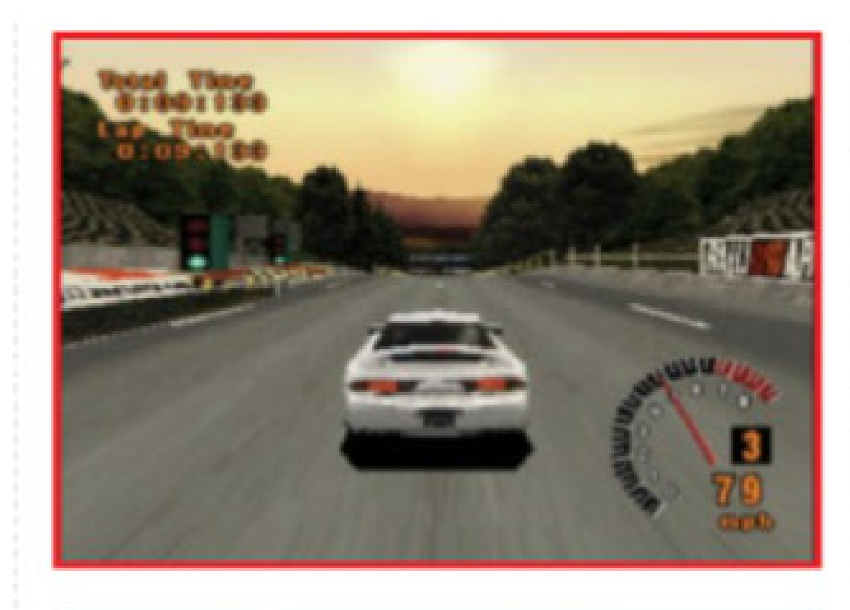
TOP OF THE POPS

★ Every generation of Sony console has seen two *Gran Turismo* releases, with *GT* through to *GT5* selling a combined 57,500,000 units. *GT3* has been the series' most successful title, with sales of 14,890,000 units on its way to becoming the PS2's second biggest selling game.



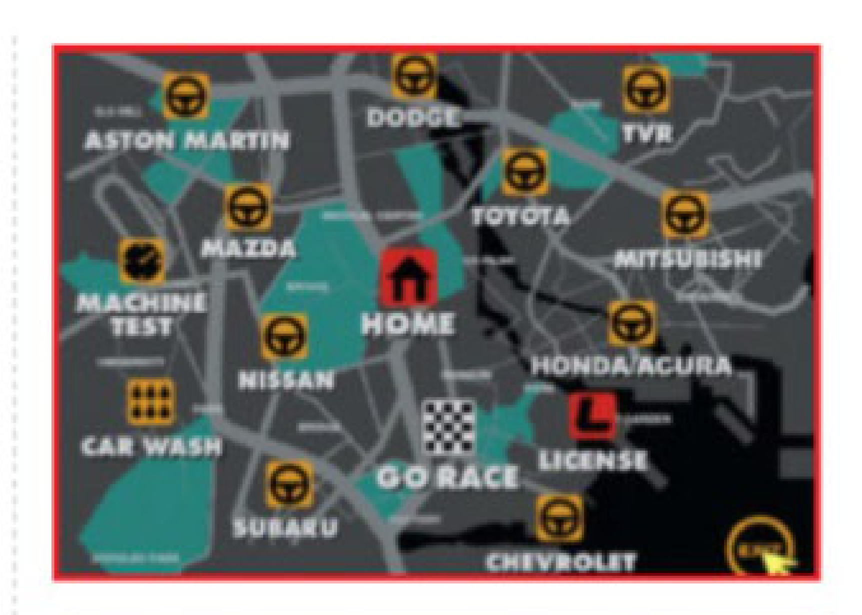
REAL RACING

★ The franchise has transcended the world of virtual racing with its GT Academy programme. Choosing the fastest racers from an online time trial, drivers are then pitted against one another in knockout rounds until a victor is picked. Winners have gone on to race at events like the 24 Hours of Le Mans.



WE'RE WAITING

★ As well as polished racing games, Polyphony Digital is notorious for making us wait to get behind the latest set of new wheels. From *Gran Turismo 2*'s delay of a few weeks due to coding issues, to the infuriating eight-month holdup before *Gran Turismo 5*'s launch, *GT* fans are a patient bunch.



DUDE WHERE'S MY...

★ Porsche? Not to be found in any *GT* games due to EA's recently ended monopoly on the 911 makers. However, the inclusion of German Porsche tuners, RUF, helped to cement the latter into the consciousness of the public. If you want official Stuttgart metal you'll have to head to *Forza* though…

Of course, all this cost money, and starting the game's main Simulation mode with just 10,000 credits meant that your first car was likely to be more suited to a Sunday run to the shops than a flat-out blast around one of the game's 11 fictional race tracks. Inevitably this meant that to find anything mildly impressive, we were sent searching the Used Car Lot. The cars on offer were regularly refreshed after a few races, but to progress, money was the name of the game and to earn it you had to grind.

Early races in *Gran Turismo* brought little reward, but to rise up through the ranks you needed to complete the sometimes infuriatingly difficult and long-winded licence tests. From simple accelerating and stopping tests to full-lap time trials, these challenges often had us screaming at the screen in frustration, such was their penchant for challenging even mildly imprecise driving.

Yet, while the hardcore nature of the career progression turned off some, it was hard not to play *Gran Turismo* just for its sheer beauty. The on-screen displays, such as speed and gear selection, may have seemed, even in the late-Nineties, straight out of an arcade booth, but the cars were pixel perfect at the time. The polygon count of the original may be orders-of-magnitude less than the current offerings, but at the time this was a game with stunning clarity.

THE AGE OF TRUE SIMULATION WAS DAWNING AND GRAN TURISMO HAD ALREADY MARKED ITS PLACE ON TOP

KEY FACTS

- With 10.85 million units shipped worldwide to date, *Gran Turismo* is the original PlayStation greatest hit. This cemented racing as one of the console's key game genres.
- It is claimed that during the five-year development period of *Gran Turismo*, Yamauchi only went home for four days.
- Yamauchi believed that, despite the depth and breadth of *GT*, the original game only forced the PlayStation to work at 75 per cent of its maximum capacity.
- The game's soundtrack set a precedent for future sequels with a heady mix of Japanese lounge music and contemporary pop songs.

Yamauchi and his five-strong team ensured that each car was true to its real-life counterpart. The handling physics were groundbreaking, setting a new benchmark for a whole generation of games. Each vehicle possessed a weight and momentum that other titles had, until that point, failed to match. The effect was the first console game to truly deserve the genre of a driving simulator.

The 11 markedly different circuits all required finesse and real skill to navigate quickly; you couldn't just pick up *Gran Turismo* and drive like a world champion, and it took time to learn your craft. Yes, handling could be fine-tuned in a myriad of ways, but ultimately this was a game about perfecting your driving style.

Perhaps, it was this that led the AI to be slightly disappointing. Each computer-controlled rival was tricky enough to prove a challenge – although difficulty was non-adjustable – but each grid was composed of just five fellow virtual racers. Along with this, the sound of each car could have done with some extra development time, proving that while it was the best of the bunch, *Gran Turismo* still had room for improvement in the coming generations.

Despite this, it's challenging, expansive gameplay provided plenty of hours in front of a screen for racing enthusiasts, topped off with an excellent in-game soundtrack of contemporary pop songs. The age of true simulation was dawning and *Gran Turismo* had already marked its place on top of the podium on its the way to becoming an international phenomenon.

GAME CHANGERS

THE EVOLUTION OF THE DRIVING SIMULATOR

GRAN TURISMO WAS BY NO MEANS THE FIRST CAR SIMULATOR, BUT IT HAS BEEN ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL GAMES OF THE GENRE, WITH MANY OTHER CONTENDERS LOOKING TO GT FOR INSPIRATION



TOCA TOURING CAR CHAMPIONSHIP 2

■ CODEMASTER'S FIRST *TOCA* release since *Gran Turismo* saw the number of cars available was noticeably expanded, and a few fictional circuits joined the excellent real-world examples. The focus was still on racing rather than purely driving, but the game was all the better for it. The AI was excellent, while the damage simulation was top notch. Handling wasn't up to *Gran Turismo's* level, but this is one of the greatest racing titles ever.



FORZA MOTORSPORT

■ AFTER RELEASING THE Xbox to rival PS2, Microsoft needed a killer driving game. Coming after two *GT* launches, Turn 10 Studios had some ground to make up, but its opening effort was admirable, already showing hints of what was to come. Sound was a step above the achievements of Polyphony, while the inclusion of mild damage simulation made some fans of the genre overlook the slightly less realistic handling physics.



BURNOUT

■ CRITERION GAMES' OVER-the-top crashfest for PS2, Xbox, and GameCube grabbed people's imagination and made quite a few fall in love with driving games again. *Burnout* was about as far from a driving simulation game as you could get without discarding the driving element altogether, but, in an age of ever-improving realism, it showed that simulation wasn't the only path you had to take to get your automotive fix.



GRAN TURISMO 4

■ FEATURING OVER 700 cars from 80 car manufacturers, *GT4* was possibly the zenith for the franchise. It's stunning graphics showed what the PS2 was capable of, while the breadth and depth of the game kept racers' hands busy for literally days. The introduction of the Nürburgring Nordschleife and the Circuit de la Sarthe were excellent real-world additions, ensuring that *GT4* would go down as one of the greatest simulators of all time.



RFACTOR

■ EVER SINCE GEOFF Crammond's series of *Grand Prix* titles, PC has been the medium 'true simulation enthusiasts' gravitate to, thanks to its greater graphical clarity and processing speed. *rFactor* popularised this conception mainly because it still is a really great example of the genre, due to its *GT*-rivaling dynamics and the huge choice of community-developed car packs.



FORZA MOTORSPORT 4

RELEASED IN 2011, *Forza 4* marked the moment where Xbox's *GT* rival finally made the overtaking move after years of flashing its headlights. The gameplay was more enjoyable, and while there were fewer cars on the disc, each was re-created beautifully. Car sounds in *Forza 4* were incredible, while the constant stream of new car and circuit packs meant the game was constantly evolving.



IRACING

■ THIS SUBSCRIPTION-BASED racing simulator is the current benchmark for the genre. PC-only, the large monthly payments ensure that a host of real-world tracks are constantly being laser-scanned, producing mind-blowingly accurate environments. Handling physics were taken above and beyond what the *Gran Turismo* series had ever achieved and the graded online racing ensures that races are always challenging.



NEED FOR SPEED: SHIFT 2

■ THE *NEED FOR Speed* franchise's general focus on the modifying scene and street racing had never given it the realism or handling dynamics to truly take the fight to Polyphony. That was until the *SHIFT* sub-brand was unveiled. *Shift* came close as a legitimate rival to *GT5* on PS3, but it wasn't until *Shift 2* that EA could truly lay claim to *GT*'s title. Car sounds were beautiful and the range of cars was excellent.



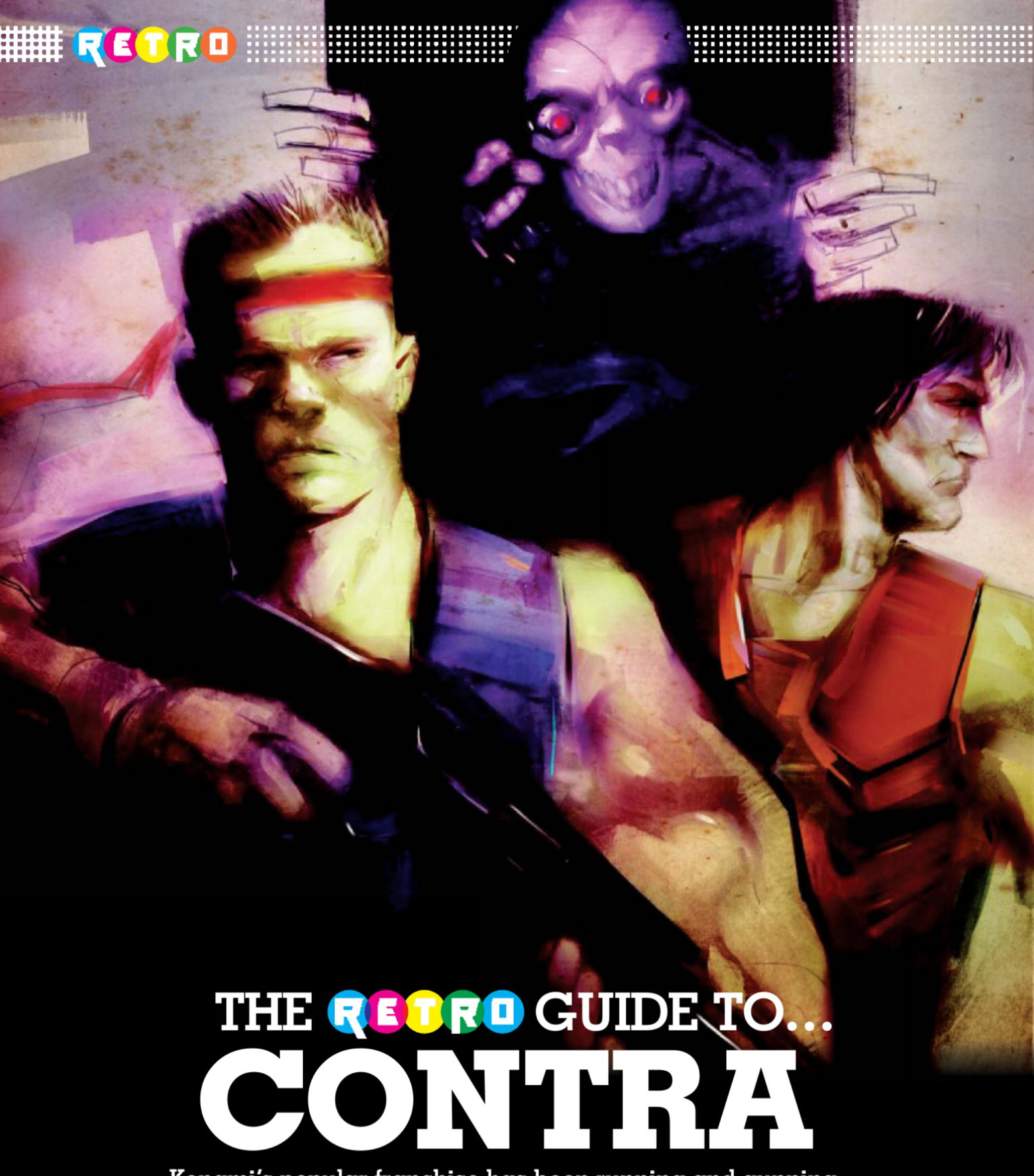
GRAN TURISMO 6

■ NOT RELEASED OUT the blue, but certainly without as much hype as previous games from Yamauchi's studio, *Gran Turismo 6* saw one last Polyphony release for the PS3. Graphics were polished, though the premium/standard car divide still remained. The handling gave much better feedback whether using a wheel or a pad, while the menu was improved, making this the best *GT* game yet, but ultimately too similar to previous releases.



PROJECT CARS

■ FORGET *DRIVECLUB, PROJECT CARS* looks like it is going to be the must-have driving simulator on next-gen consoles. Making use of the PS4 and Xbox One's PC-like architecture, the current in-game screens are easily mistakable for real-life. It looks like there will be plenty of exotic real-life metal to test on a host of accurately modelled tracks. This could be a seminal moment where console simulation finally becomes a true rival to the PC.



THE RETRO GUIDE TO... CONTRA

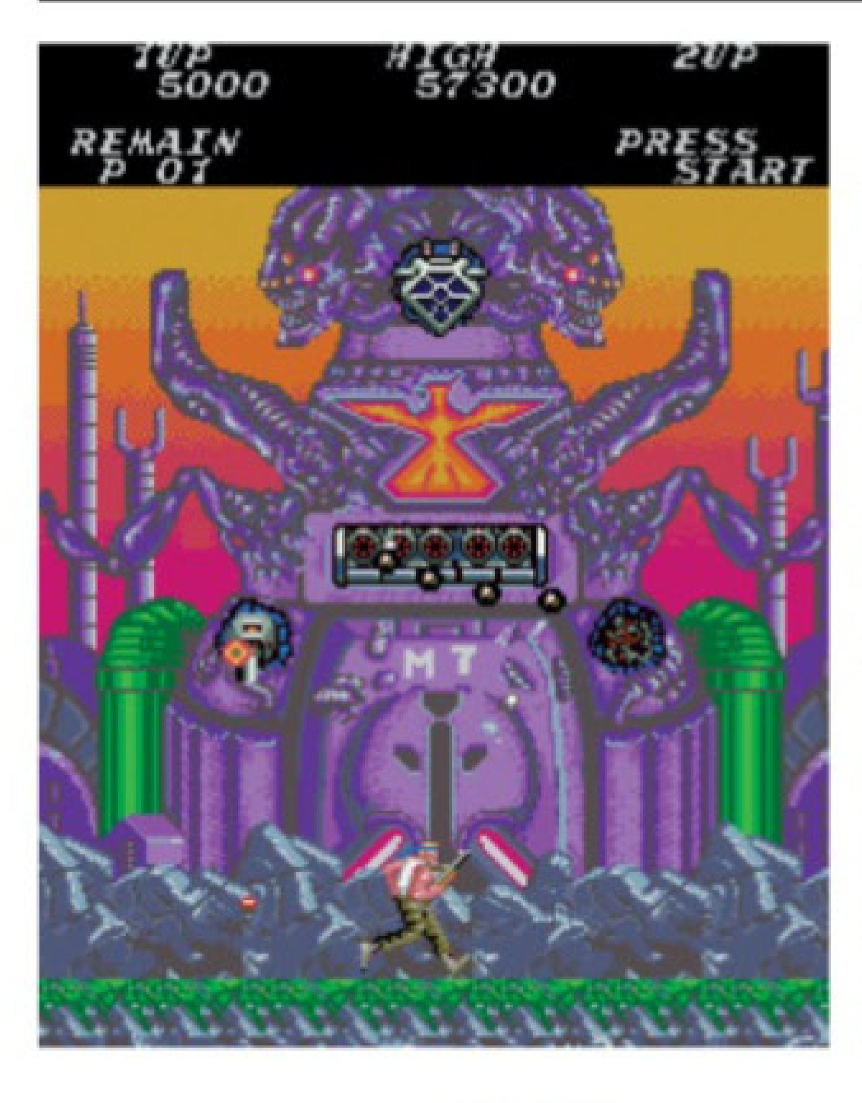
Konami's popular franchise has been running and gunning for 27 years. With no sign of a new game on the horizon, we've decided to replay all of the originals instead

KONAMI'S *CONTRA* FRANCHISE took the Eighties films of Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger and combined them with the gross xenomorphs of *Aliens* to create one of the company's most beloved series.

The original game helped to create the popular run-and-gun genre and was soon copied by countless imitators, from *Midnight Resistance* to *Metal Slug*. Unlike some of the franchises featured in past guides, *Contra* was never heavily milked, and while it has its fair share of poor games, Konami was always trying to do something interesting with the series.

Join us as we celebrate the franchise that celebrates Eighties excess like no other.

"THE ORIGINAL GAME HELPED TO CREATE THE POPULAR RUN-AND-GUN GENRE AND WAS SOON COPIED"





CONTRA 1987

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

This is the game that started it all. While *Contra* certainly wasn't the first run-and-gun game, it arguably defined the genre thanks to fantastic visuals, beefy weapons and interestingly designed levels. Essentially a tribute to the films of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone, *Contra* was a side-on scroller that saw you running and gunning through all sorts of dangerous locations.

It's notable for having an excellent two-player mode, a range of weapons and some interesting over-the-shoulder levels that saw you gunning down enemies as you made your way into the enemy base.

The plot itself is laughably silly, explaining how Bill "Mad Dog" Rizer and Lance "Scorpion" Bean take on the dreaded Red Falcon Organisation located off the Galuga archipelago near New Zealand. Interestingly, when Konami released *Contra* on the NES, the European version was known as *Probotector*, and Bill and Lance were replaced by robots, neatly bypassing Germany's strict censorship laws that stopped videogames from being fun.

Further confusion arose with the home-computer version called *Gryzor*, boasting some superb Bob Wakelin box art. They're decent conversions, but have a number of differences to the arcade original.







SUPER CONTRA 1988

SYSTEM: ARCADE, NES

Considering the popularity of the original game, this was the first and only arcade sequel for the franchise. So what was so super about Konami's sequel then? Well, quite a lot, actually.
The levels alternate perspectives, but this time the over-the-shoulder sections have been replaced by top-down romps, similar to earlier shooters like *Commando* and *Ikari Warriors*, and Bill and Lance are once again doing their best impressions of Eighties action heroes.

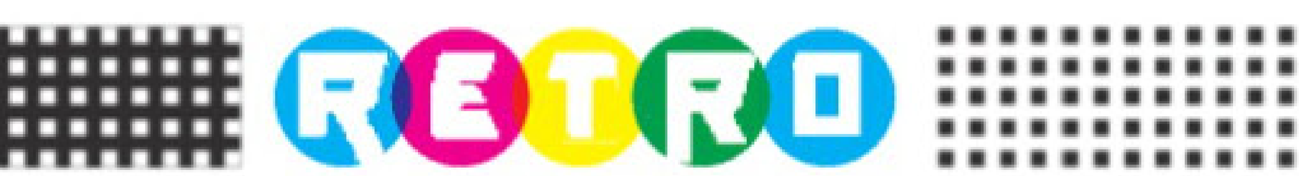
Super Contra is a lot of fun thanks to the variety of its locations and a selection of meaty weaponry, with shot guns, bomb guns and the stupidly powerful mega shell. Conversions appeared on the NES and a variety of 16-bit computers, while the arcade original turned up on Xbox Live Arcade in 2007.

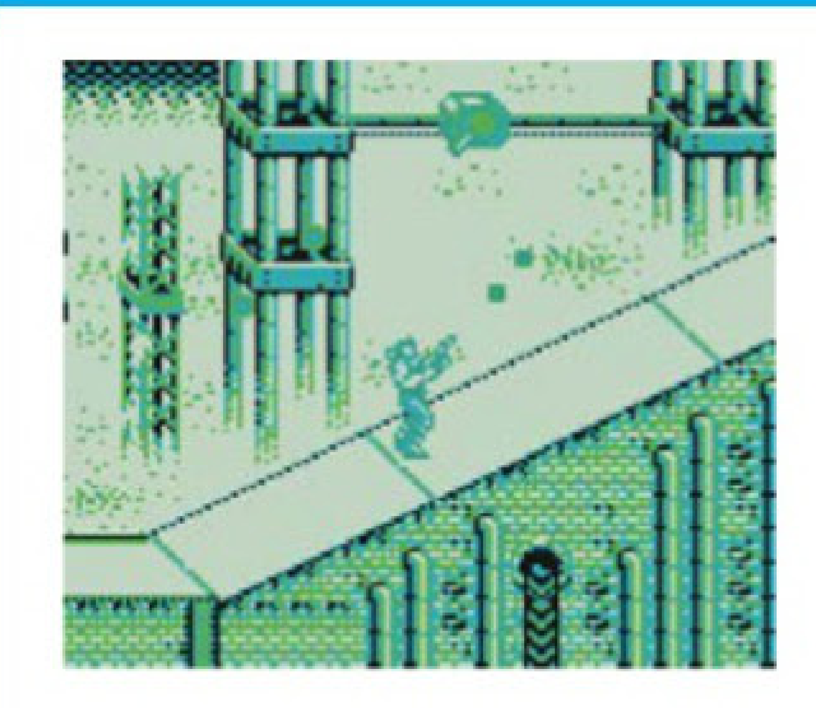


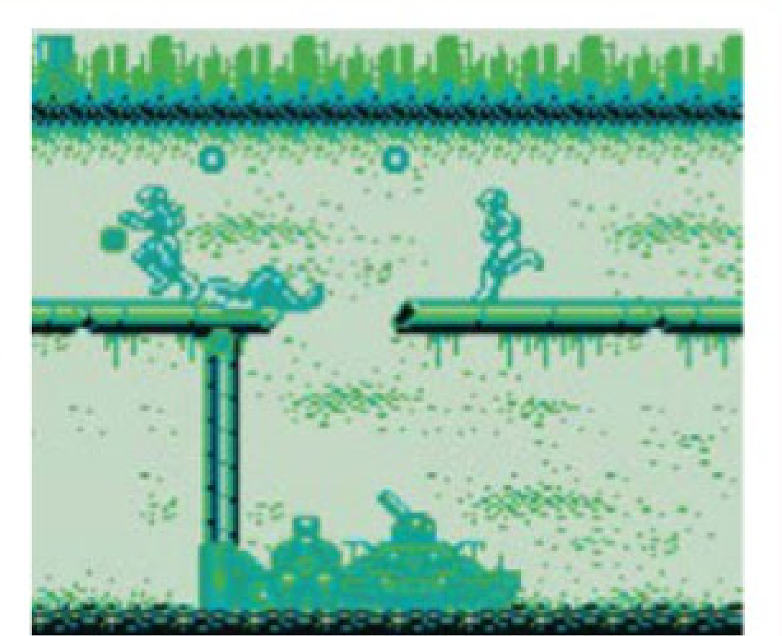
GRYZOR 1989

SYSTEM: MSX2

We were going to lump this conversion with the other *Gryzors*, but it's so different it deserves its own entry. While the graphics are reminiscent of the NES game, it's very sluggish. It has the same flick-screen approach of the Amstrad version, but there's now a life bar, allowing you to take more hits. Getting new weapons pauses the game so you get to choose between the new gun and your existing one. There's no multiplayer mode either and the spread gun has been replaced with one that shoots backwards. Overall it's a bit of a mess.





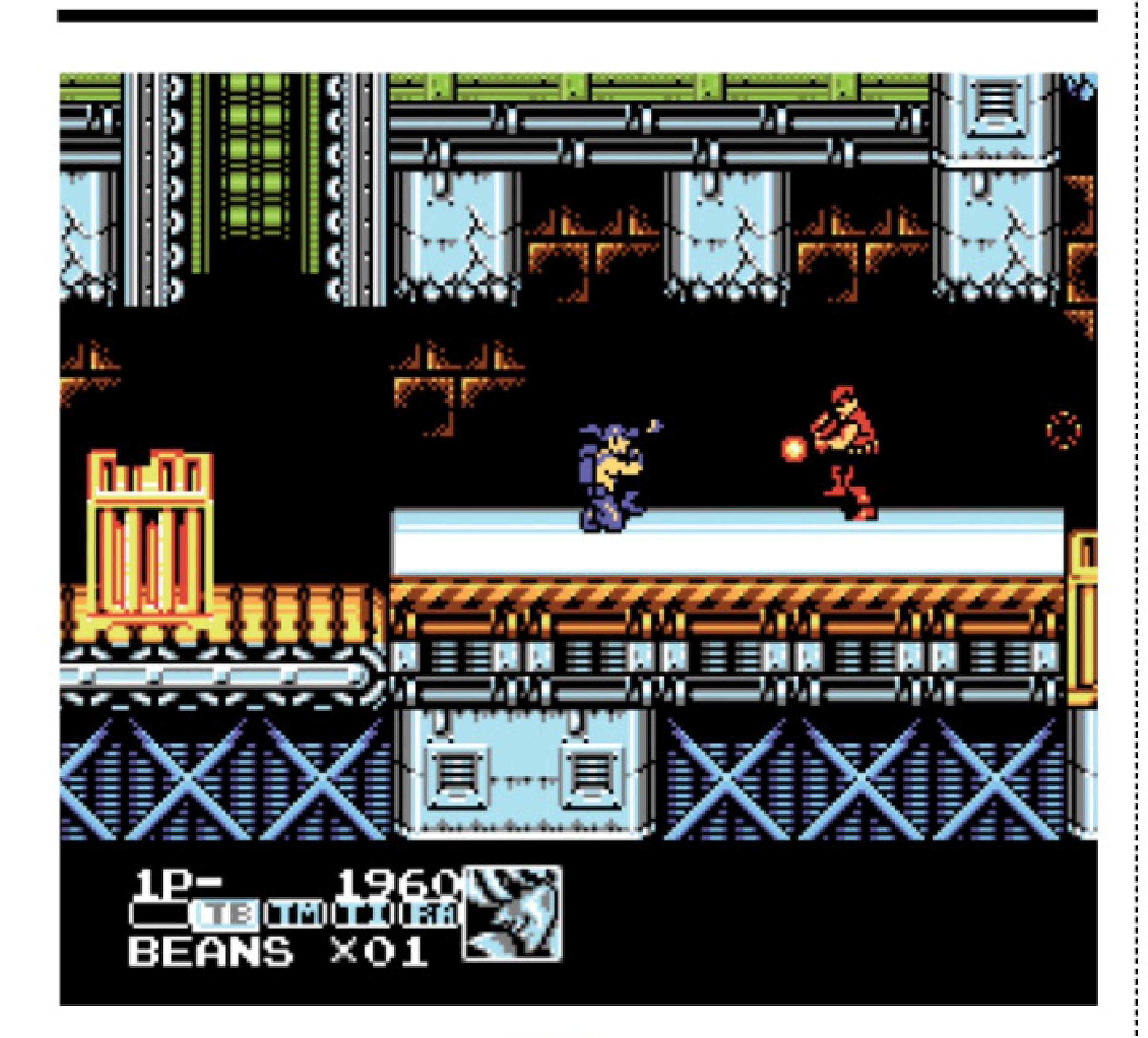


CONTRA 1991

SYSTEM: GAME BOY

■ Although it made a pig's ear of its first original *Castlevania* game on Nintendo's handheld, Konami made no such mistakes with this offering. The Japanese iteration lets you play the first four levels in any order, while the US version, known as *Operation C*, required inputting the infamous Konami Code. Graphically it looks very similar to the NES *Contra*, albeit in monochrome form, but has noticeable differences, particularly when it comes to bosses.

Contra is the first game in the series to include autofire, meaning the machine gun of past games is nowhere to be seen. It also introduces the homing gun, while the spread gun now upgrades from three to five bullets. These weapon enhancements are useful, as *Contra* (or *Probotector* as it's known in Europe) is surprisingly tough. You'll stick with it, though, as the levels are so well designed.



CONTRA FORCE 1992

SYSTEM: NES

■ *Contra Force* – the first *Contra* to be a NES exclusive – was originally going to be called *Arc Hound* and released in Japan, before Konami decided to shoehorn it into the *Contra* template. Once it had moved on from its *Arc Hound* identity to become *Contra Force*, it was then only released exclusively in America. The biggest difference was that the four characters all have different stats and weapons, with a new power-up system that borrows from Konami's *Gradius*. It's even possible to summon another character to help out.



CONTRA SPIRITS 1992

SYSTEM: SNES

■ *Contra Spirits* is not only the best game in the franchise, it may well be the best run-and-gun game of all time. Konami's 16-bit period was an incredible one for the developer, delivering hit after hit, and in *Contra Spirits* delivered a game that bursts with creativity. One minute you're riding jet-powered motorbikes, the next you're soaring through the air while hanging from a cruise missile. It cartwheels from one set piece to the next – an action game that never quits.

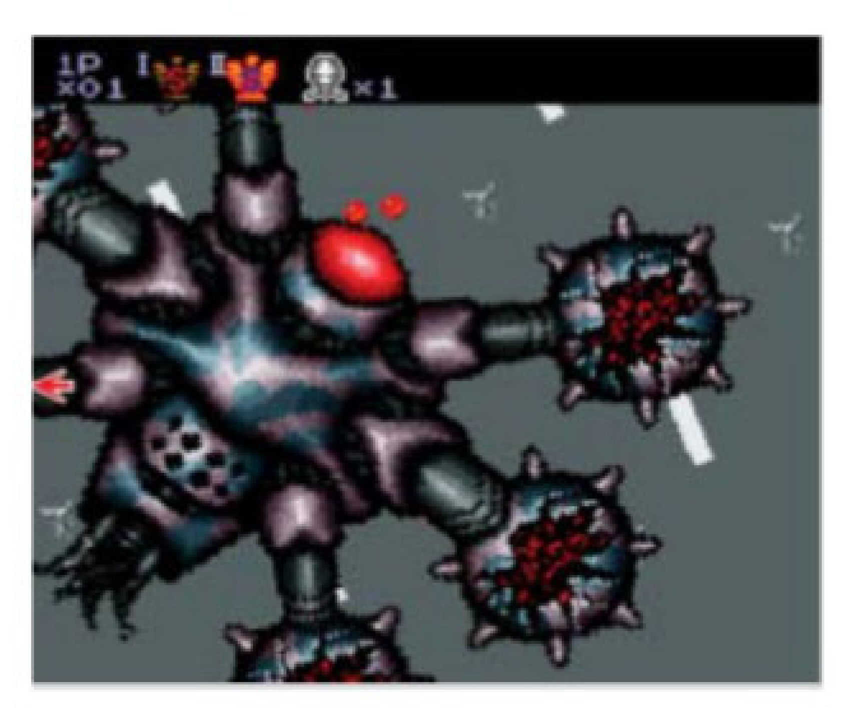
Contra has always been blessed with gruesome, imaginative mayors, but Konami pulled out all the stops with *Contra Spirits*, delivering an insane menagerie of wacky combatants, from giant turtles to a huge skeleton head. Many of them are powered by Mode 7, most notably in stages two and four, where the typical side-on stages are replaced by overhead levels that let you spin the game world with the L and R buttons.

In addition to scintillating aesthetics, *Contra Spirits* also delivered plenty of new ideas for the franchise. New guys Jimbo and Sully can hold up to two weapons, losing the one that was activated when they get shot. They can combine both weapons to unleash a devastating attack for short amounts of time. Characters can also lock into place, firing in eight directions without moving, as well as climb below or up objects. There's a cut-down Game Boy port as well, that gets rid of a large number of the bosses, but is still impressive.

Also known as *Contra III*, *Contra Spirits* is a stunning achievement that Konami has never topped.

"IN ADDITION TO SCINTILLATING AESTHETICS, CONTRA SPIRITS ALSO DELIVERED PLENTY OF NEW IDEAS"









CONTRA: HARD CORPS 1994

SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE

During the 16-bit years, Konami seemed to have a rule that roughly went like this. Make amazing games for the SNES and pretend the Mega Drive didn't exist. Eventually this unofficial exclusivity was broken and the Mega Drive began to reap the benefits of Konami's 16-bit awesomeness. Many people (most likely Mega Drive owners) believe *Hard Corps* to be better than *Contra Spirits*. They're totally wrong of course, but it's an easy mistake to make.

After all, it has four unique characters, each with their own weapon load outs, branching story paths and multiple endings. You can switch between weapons, jump and lock in place to control your firepower, while the bosses are some of the best yet, brilliantly showing off the Mega Drive's seven-year-old hardware. Interestingly, the Japanese version is infinitely easier than its Western counterparts, thanks to a life gauge that lets characters take three hits before losing a life, along with unlimited continues.



CONTRA: LEGACY OF WAR 1996

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION, SATURN

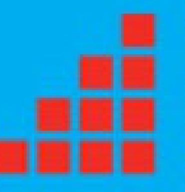
The good news is that Konami's first 32-bit *Contra* game is nowhere near as bad as many make it out to be. The bad news is that we're lying and it's actually woefully average, particularly when you look at the insanely creative tour-de-forces that came before it.

Created by Appaloosa Interactive, the developer decided that having you run a gauntlet of ridiculously powerful enemies would be far more interesting than the balanced gameplay of previous games. For whatever reason, like *Contra Force* before it, it never received a release in the country where the series originated.

There's a nice ending to our tale of woe, though. The addition of 3D anaglyph glasses was a fun touch, offering a surprising amounts of depth and making the exploding bosses look rather cool. What a pity, then, that Appaloosa used the drabbest colours in the console's palette, giving even this positive aspect of the game something of a sour note.

INTERVIEW WITH MATT BOZAN

WayForward Technologies opens up on the brilliant Contra 4 for Nintendo DS



What *Contra* games did you take inspiration from?

The plan from both companies was to stick to *Contra NES*, *Super C*, and *III*. We looked to Contra *NES* as the blueprint for its pure white-knuckle action and platform elements, and *III* for player movement and how to dissect set pieces. We wanted to steer clear of anything too outrageous, since recent *Contras* had gone off on a rabbit trail. This was the back-to-basics game.

Tell us about the cancelled four-player mode.

Our first playable incarnation was four-player Wi-Fi, but it was taking us in the direction of a wildly unbalanced game with fewer bells and whistles. We dabbled with Rumble Pak, but the team wanted each feature done right or not at all.

Why would you introduce the grappling hook?

We needed a wide virtual gap, so that bullets would appear to travel in a straight line. Early on, we had a cheat that let us increase or decrease the gap size in real-time. With bullets shearing, you couldn't aim well or predict enemy bullet paths, so, we added the grappling hook in the hope of avoiding the action getting hidden in the gap. We also cranked up gravity so you could fall faster than in other *Contra* games. All of this because of the screen ratio. It's much taller than an arcade cabinet. If you want to feel our pain, stack two Post-it notes and that's our play space.

Why didn't you use the overhead levels found in the SNES game?

I really enjoyed those in the SNES game, but we decided early on that the tunnel view was the way to go. Konami loved the tunnel/base levels in original *Contra*, and thought it would be a good choice for the 20th anniversary game. We considered branching paths within the maze, but in the end had to keep it simple.

It's nice you remixed the original tunes.

Our approach to the music was similar to the stage breakdown. We had a nice split of nostalgia and new stuff, which Jake Kaufman (Virt) served up with gusto. For me, I don't think it's *Contra* without the *Jungle Song*, title C*all To Arms*, and the *Game Over* song.







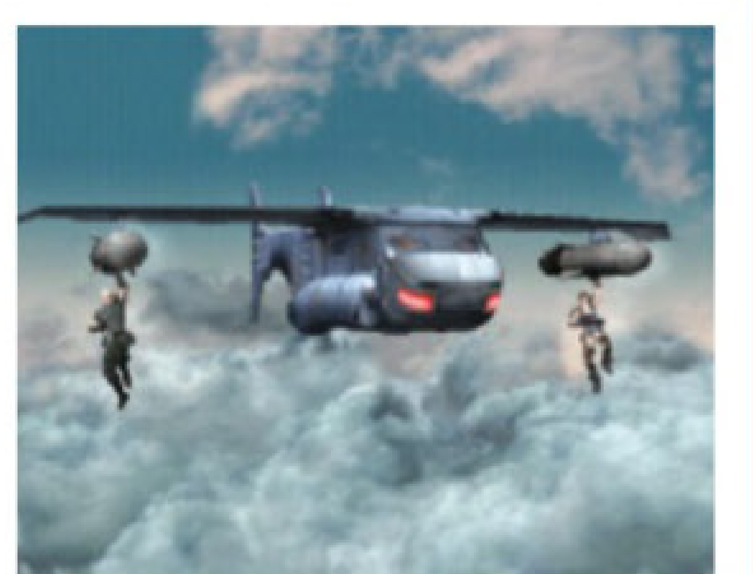


C: THE CONTRA ADVENTURE 1998

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION

■ *C: The Contra Adventure* was much better than *Contra: Legacy Of War*. Not amazing, mind, but certainly more in line with past games. It utilises a pseudo-2.5D effect that was popular at the time and features traditional side-on levels that are actually entertaining to battle through. There are top-down and third-person sections (although these are nowhere near as good as the standard levels) and the whole difficulty has been ramped down so you won't want to kick your TV in. There's even a little nod to the over-the-shoulder sections found in the original game, while the aesthetics are far better than *Legacy Of War*'s.





CONTRA: SHATTERED SOLDIER 2002

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2

■ Konami realised that it wasn't worth farming out its franchise to a Western developer and took the series in-house for its first PS2 game. Handled by Nobuya Nakazato, it's a typical *Contra* affair that nevertheless tries new things, most notably with the weapon system that now gives you three different weapons to cycle between. *Shatter Soldier* is insanely tough in places with its measly three lives and continues in Normal mode. Easy mode offers nine lives and 100 continues, but you'll feel dirty for using it.

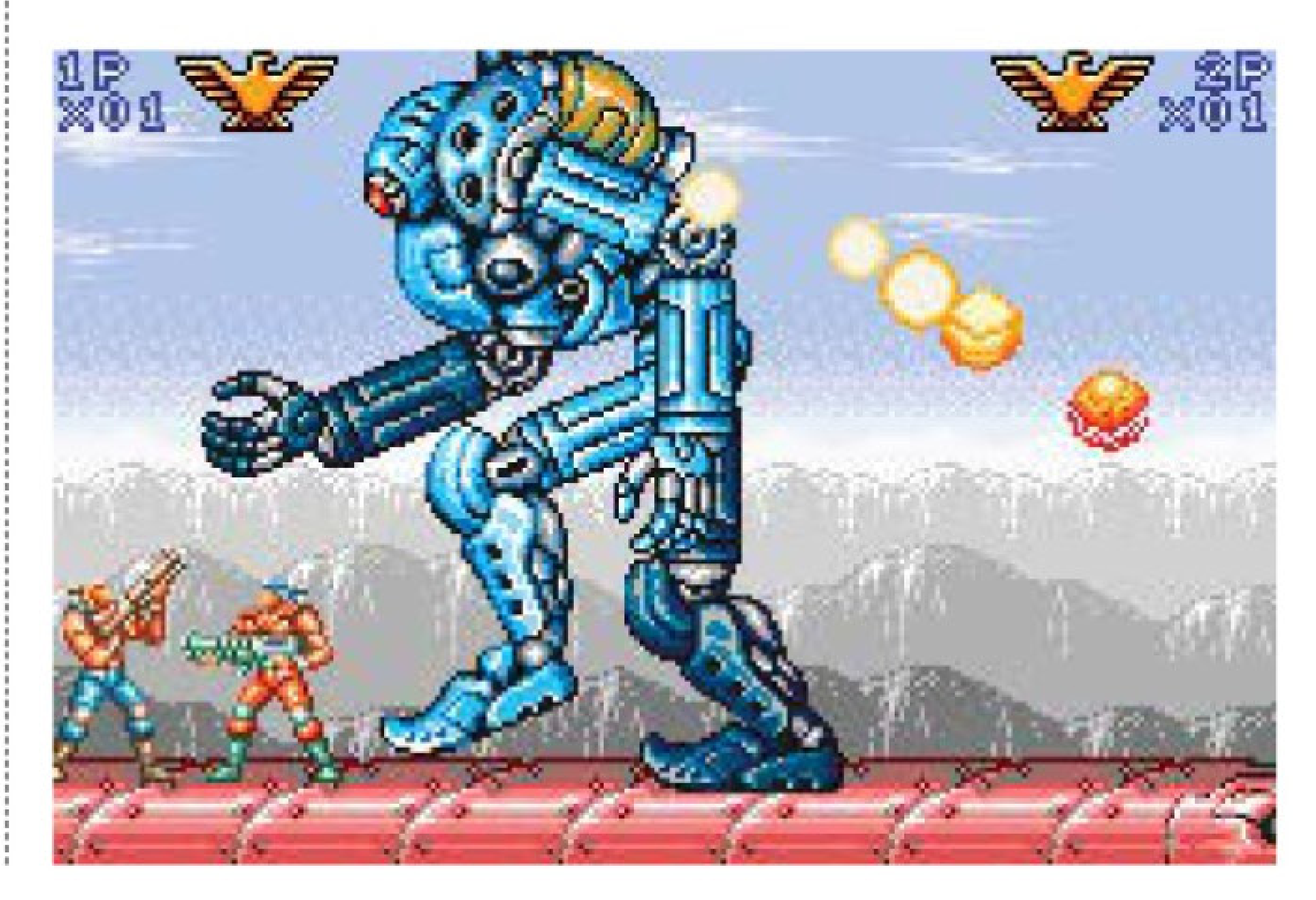


CONTRA ADVANCE: THE ALIEN WARS EX 2002

SYSTEM: GAME BOY ADVANCE

■ At first glance this appears to be a simple conversion of the hit SNES game. There are a few differences, however, that make it a little harder and not quite as good. The biggest omission is that there's no smart bomb, making boss fights tougher. That's alright though, as you can still carry two weapons, right? Nope, meaning one of the coolest attacks of the original game is no longer available. By far the biggest upset, though, is the loss of the two Mode 7 overhead levels.

Worry not though, as Konami kindly included two exclusive levels, rather than simply cutting the game down even more. One stage has you running along a train with the aim of stopping a gigantic running robot, the other sees you tackling a lab with all sorts of bio-weapon-type beasties. The two levels integrate well, but they can't excuse the dreadful hash the developer did with the orchestral soundtrack, cutting it so heavily it sounds like it was composed on a rubbish keyboard.



CLONE RUNNERS More games heavily indebted to Contra

MIDNIGHT RESISTANCE 1989

■ The thing about Data East's arcade game is keys. Collect them from enemies and you can unlock over-the-top weapons at a stage's end. The other thing was its use of rotary joysticks.

METAL SLUG 1999

■ Nazca's superb game added an incredibly cute tank to proceedings and lots and lots of humour. It's an amazingly robust game with great weapons, cracking bosses and stunning animation. There are over ten games in the series.

GUNSTAR HEROES 1993

■ Treasure's first videogame proved that you didn't need huge teams to create amazing games. Packed with imaginative levels and boss designs, it lets you combine different types of weapons to create new ones.

TURRICAN 1990

■ Created by legendary C64 coder Manfred Trenz, *Turrican* took the run-and-gun format, but married it to level exploration, giving you large areas to roam about. It also added an amazingly cool lock-on laser that made your enemies cry.

SUPER STAR WARS 1992

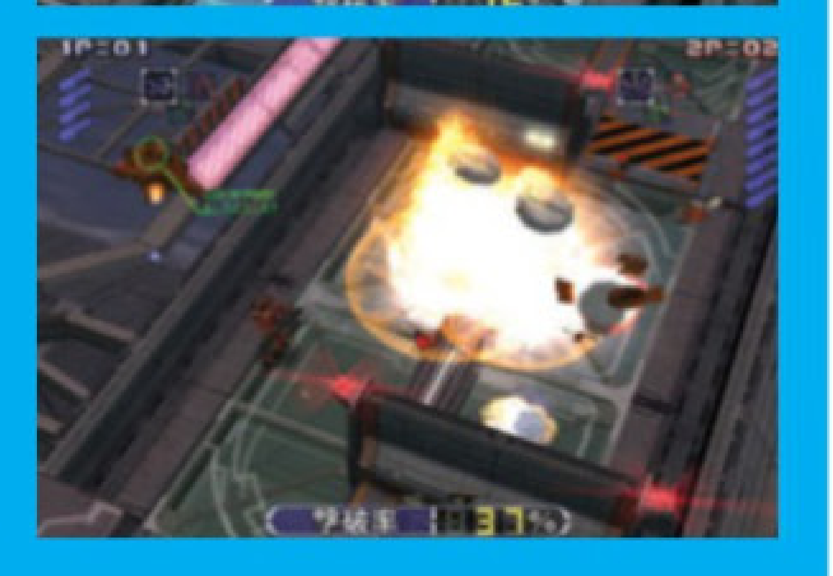
■ *Super Star Wars* is a delightful run-and-gun game that boasts excellent visuals, challenging bosses and some fantastic use of Mode 7. It's challenging, too, meaning you'll need the force to finish its later stages.

NEO CONTRA 2004

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2







What happened here? Konami decided that making another *Contra* game in the mould of *Legacy Of War*, but with ridiculously outlandish bosses was a great idea. Graphically, it's interesting, but the gameplay is all over the place. There's a similar weapon system to *Shattered Soldier*, but it now includes a specific weapon for locking onto airborne targets. The jump was replaced with evade and spin moves. Although the game can be completed relatively easily, the skill comes from trying to get the best possible ranking. It's rounded off by a plot that's crazier than *Shattered Soldier*'s.



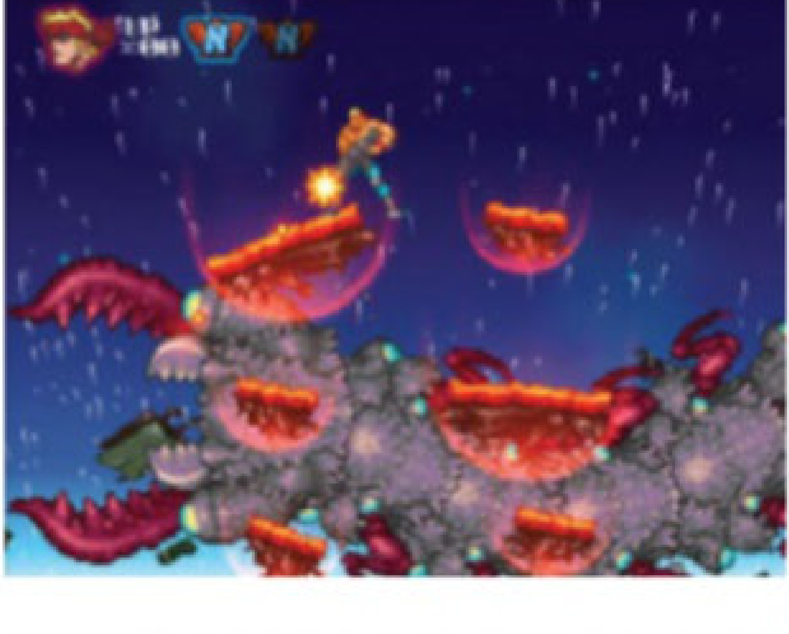


CONTRA 4 2007

SYSTEM: 2DS

Created to celebrate *Contra*'s 20th anniversary, *Contra 4* was a triumphant return to the glory days of old. WayForward Technologies clearly understood what made the franchise tick, delivering well-crafted levels, plenty of challenging, exotic-looking bosses and an all-new Challenge mode upon completing the main game. It's an interesting mode as well, with the player revisiting stages, but having to take care of specific requirements along the way, adding to *Contra 4*'s longevity.

There's use of the second screen as well, with the player using a grappling hook to switch between each screen. Bullets can be occasionally difficult to dodge as they pass screens, but it otherwise works extremely well, with the second screen doubling as a map for the over-the-shoulder sections that occasionally pop up. Add in arcade-perfect renditions of the first two games, lots of concept art and comics, plus various other goodies and *Contra 4* represents a stunning return to form, and proof that Western developers do understand Konami's classic franchise.

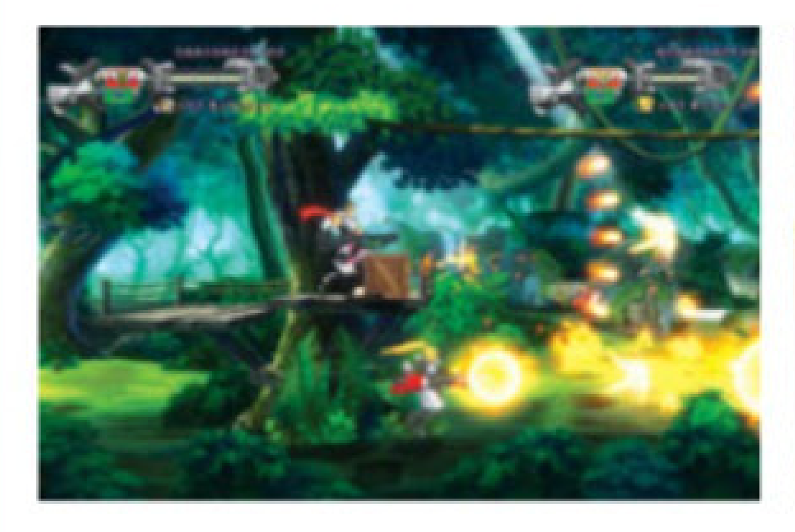




CONTRA REBIRTH 2009

SYSTEM: WII

Created by emulation masters M2, *ReBirth* is a classy sequel that almost feels like a greatest hits of past games. It features the two-weapon system of *Contra Spirits*, and similar-looking visuals to the SNES classic, but lacks the smart bomb and ability to combine your weapons. The weapons are big and meaty (although the flamethrower is a sad omission), while the bosses are suitably abstract and outlandish. It supports two players, has some stunning set pieces and boasts brilliant remixes of earlier classic tunes. The only real downside is that Lance is nowhere to be seen and it's a little too short. Other than that, it's a fitting tribute to the series that should appeal to anyone, *Contra* fan or otherwise.





HARD CORPS: UPRISING 2011

SYSTEM: PS3, XBOX 360

This remarkable effort from Arc System Works is a prequel to both *Hard Corps* and *Contra*. The first thing you notice about *Uprising* is how beautiful it looks. The 2D visuals are glorious and full of character. You then realise that your new heroes are far more agile than past games, having access to air dashes, double jumps and the ability to reflect enemy fire. Points collected in the game allow you to upgrade weapons, armour and abilities, adding an additional level of strategy to the series. If you want an even bigger challenge, try out Arcade mode.





CONTRA EVOLUTION 2011

SYSTEM: ARCADE ANDROID, IOS

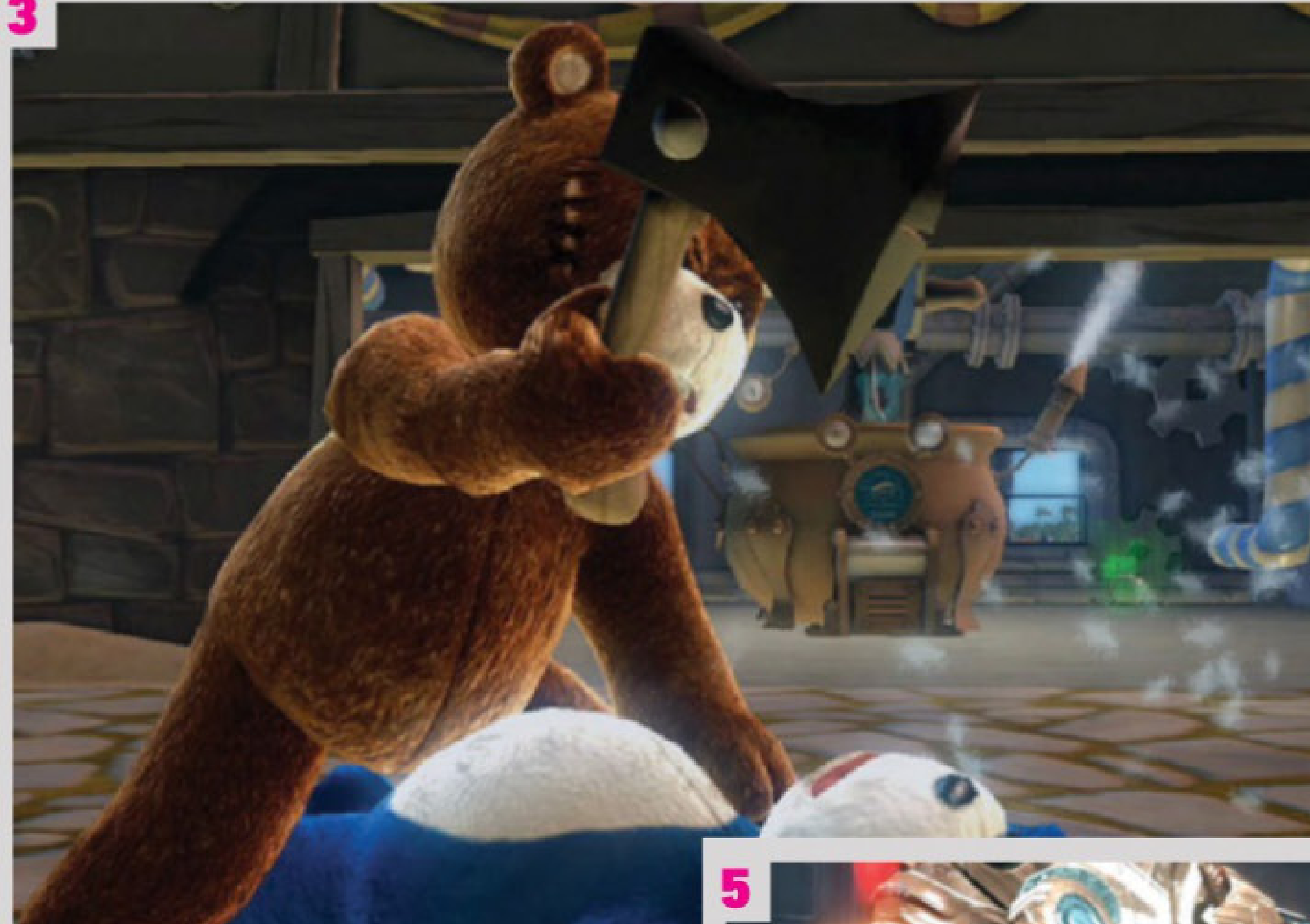
The last-released *Contra* is an odd one. It's effectively the original game with enhanced graphics and new level layouts. Predictably, it features plenty of in-app purchases, but it's actually possible to make surprising progress in the game. Less impressive is that a game like *Contra* just doesn't work unless the controls are super responsive, and sadly, touchscreens just aren't up to the task.

ESSENTIALS

10 'B-MOVIE' GEMS

At **games™**, we tend to take a pretty serious approach to gaming. We feel like we can look past the superficial to the hidden depths. In light of that, we've trawled through our archives and asked around our sister magazines to try and find out what games made a disgusting impression only to prove themselves sweet and satisfying later on. Here's **games™**'s top 10 videogame equivalents of B-movies:

3



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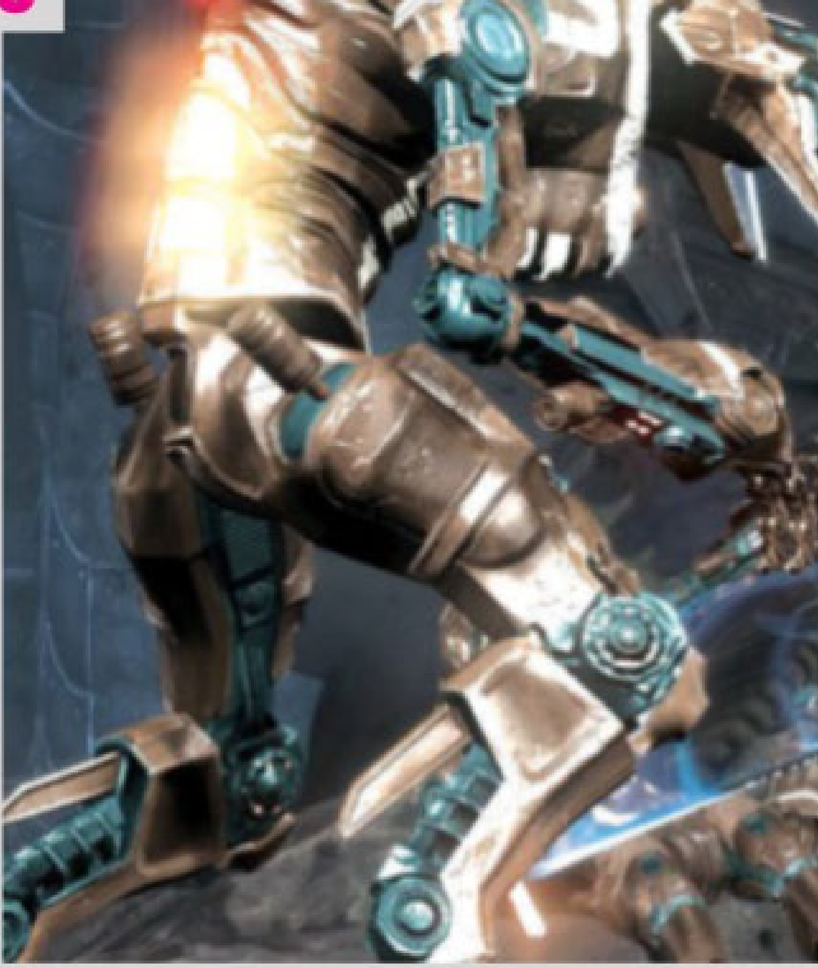


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5



Miami Vice: The Game
Developer: Rebellion Developments

1 For a PSP game, *Miami Vice* achieved something special – it managed to grab your attention by the collar and keep it held there, despite the game's many (*many*) failings. It was low-budget, ugly as sin and short, but yet it had an odd charm. Our own Editor-In-Chief suggested this game for this list, even though it glitched out on him and trapped him inside a wooden crate for an hour or so. It somehow, despite everything, evoked the feeling of *Miami Vice* – we have to praise it for that.

Ninja Blade
Developer: From Software

2 *Ninja Blade* was a gleefully stupid game, but we're not sure it *knew* how stupid it was. You played as one ninja in a unit of specially trained military ninjas (bear with us) tasked with killing giant mutations from outer space. Developed by From – who would go on to dominate the hardcore market with the *Souls* series – the game was plagued with QTEs, horrific events that made up roughly a third of the game. It slowed the pace somewhat, but when *Ninja Blade* was good, it really was *good*.

Naughty Bear
Developer: Artificial Mind and Movement

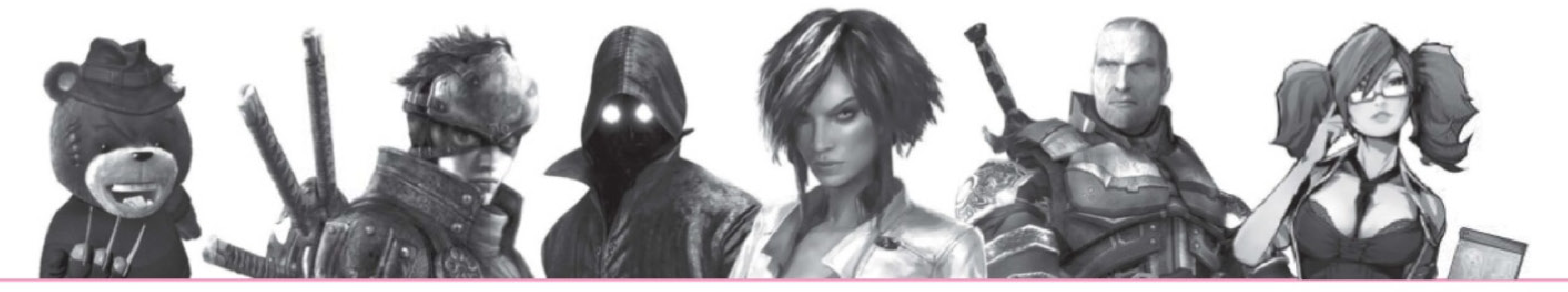
3 Inspired by the likes of *Manhunt*, *Grand Theft Auto* and *Destroy All Humans*, *Naughty Bear* certainly set its sights high. Unfortunately, the developer lacked the nuance and awareness the studios behind its inspirations had, and the game ended up being naught more than an offensive journey through a juvenile world full of bastardised fairy tales and horror tropes. It was off-colour and wrong, yet anarchically fun. It even handled badly, yet something about the cartoonish stupidity and imaginative challenge of the game stuck with us.

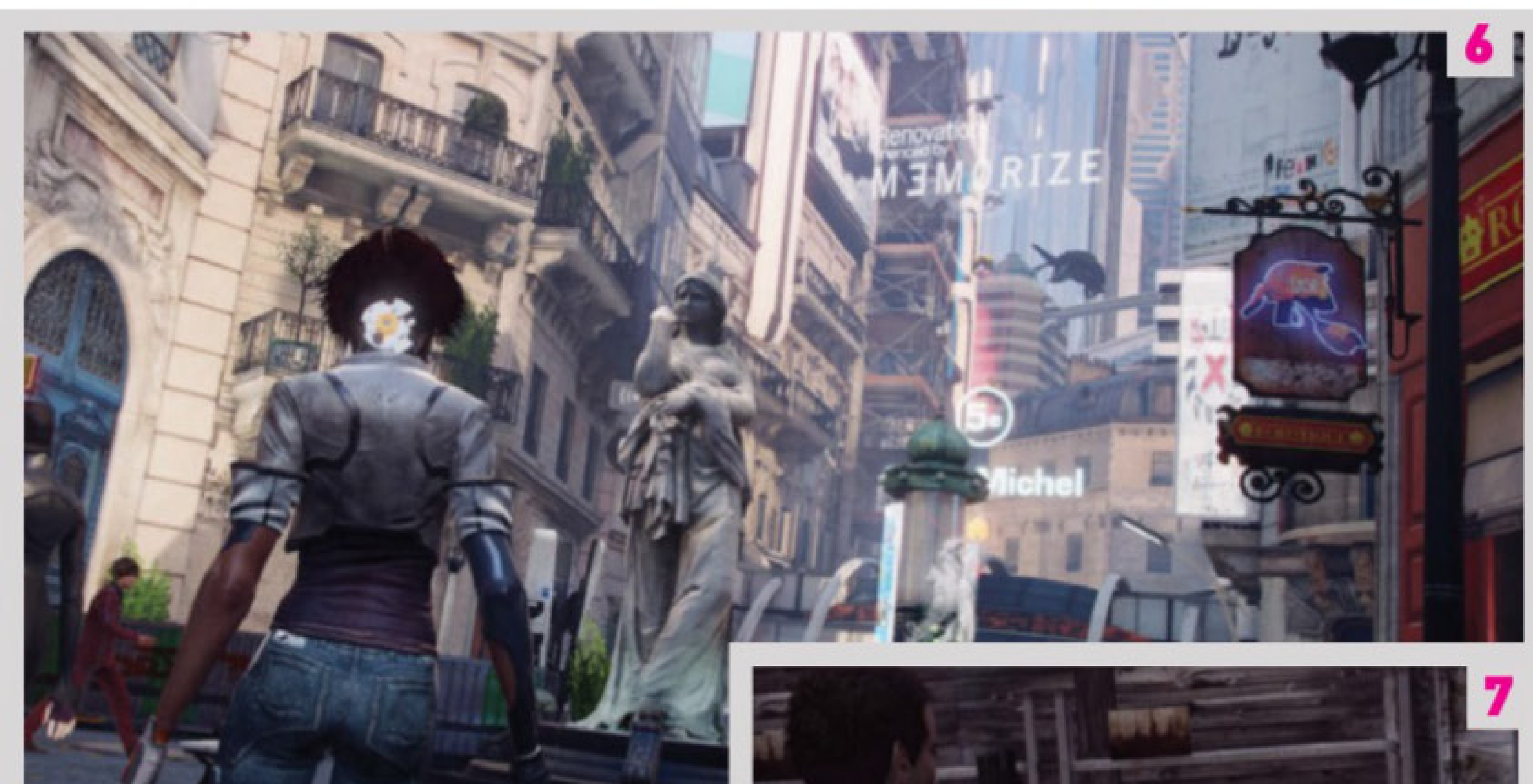
White Knight Chronicles
Developer: Level-5

4 *White Knight Chronicles* bucked a trend back on the PS3 – during a time where JRPGs seemed to be suffering an identity crisis and getting really self-conscious with how much silliness/epicness they thought they could get away with, the game took the genre in a less serious direction. The forced online components of the game were broken and frustrating, but the action-based battles were more intuitive and engaging than a lot of the JRPG fodder at the time. The game reviewed well, too – so it's a shame the critical response didn't mirror the poor consumer reception.

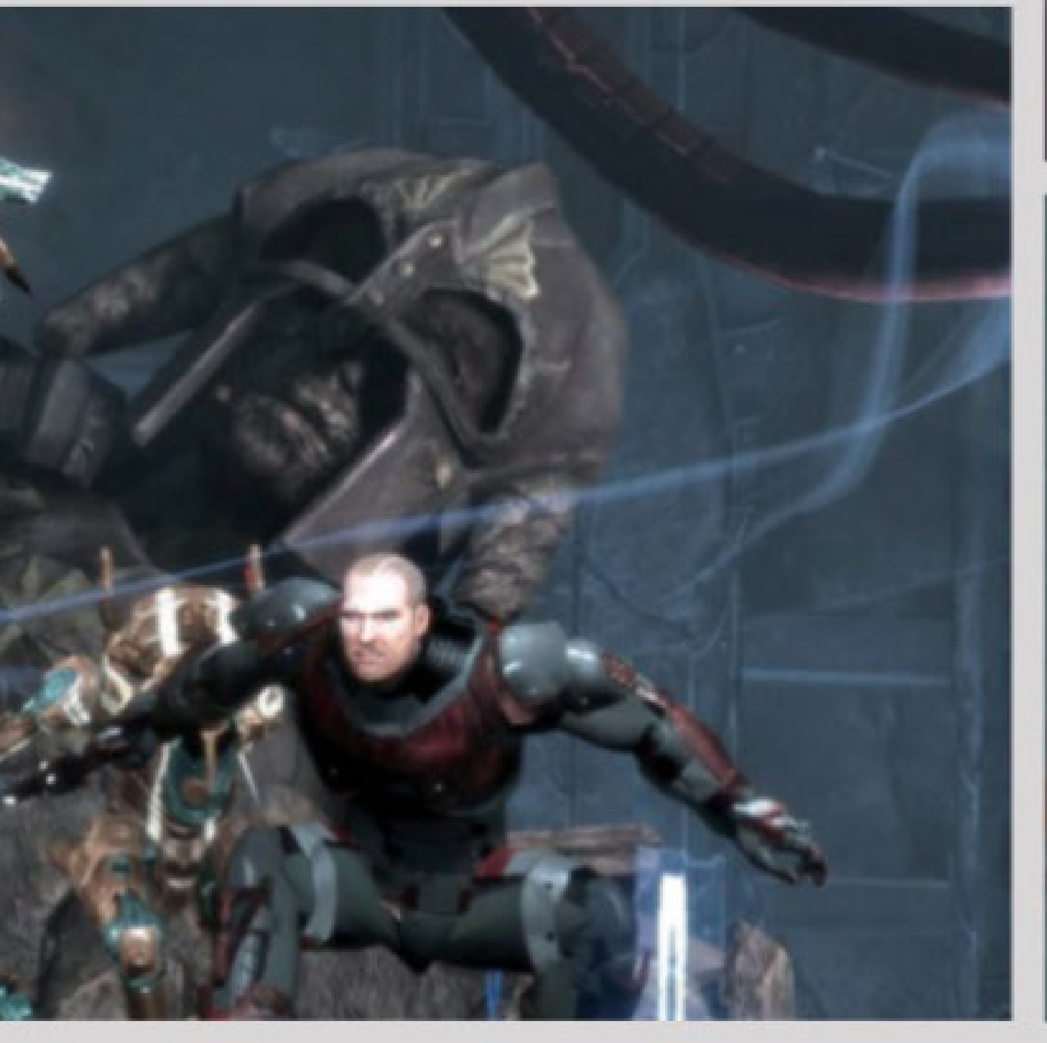
Too Human
Developer: Silicon Knights

5 For a game that was in development for ten years – initially billed as a four-disc PSone release – *Too Human* disappointed more or less everyone with how broken, unsatisfying and self-indulgent it was. The game single-handedly destroyed Silicon Knights, and was labelled by many as the biggest disappointment of the generation. The game's setting and story were so promising, too; the Norse mythology infused with futurism and sociological criticism was inspired. Had the game featured four-player co-op – as originally intended – it would no doubt have performed better. Even just by a little bit.

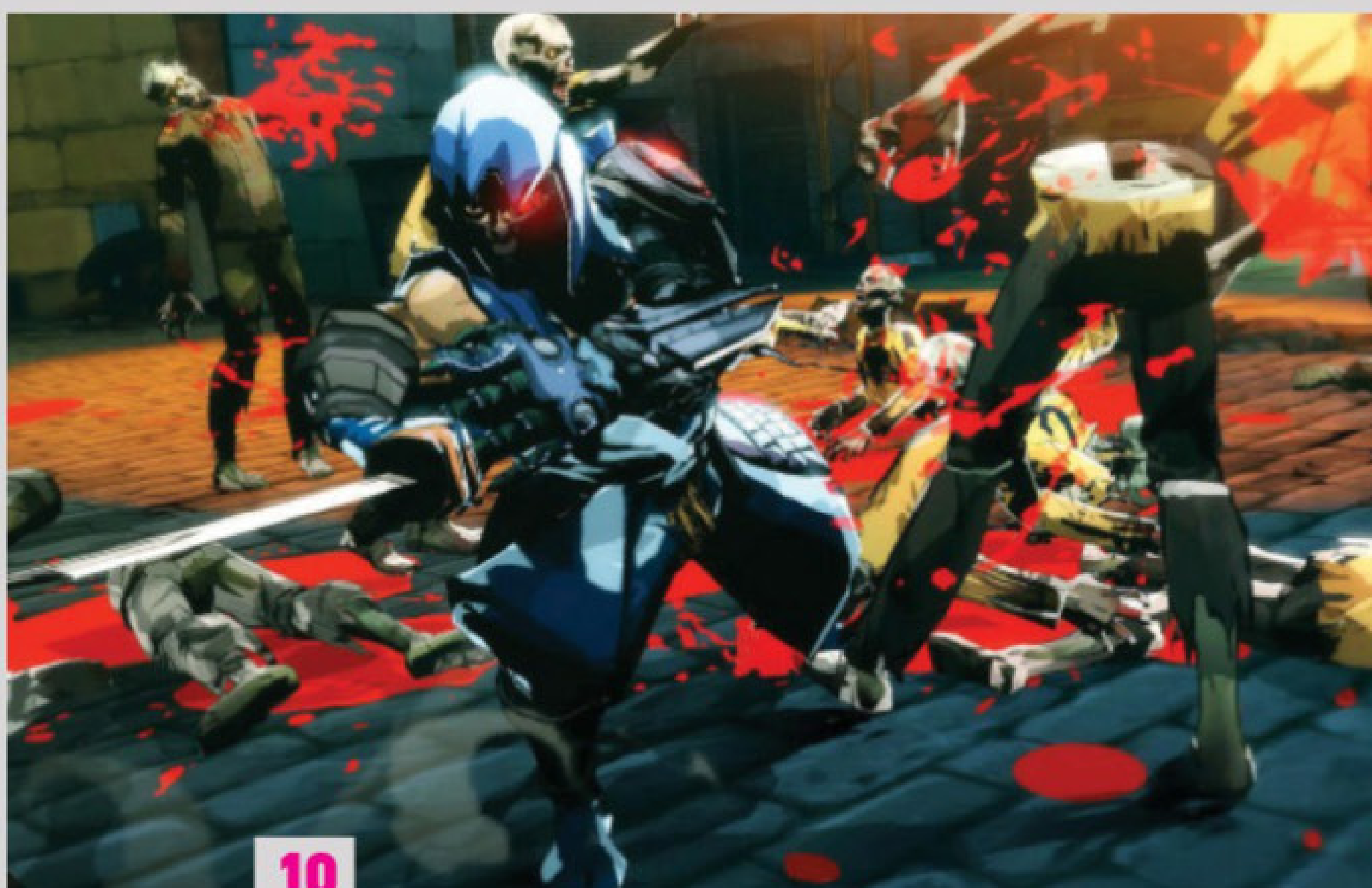












Remember Me
Developer: Dontnod Entertainment

6 *Remember Me* was a strange beast of a game – and a departure from the norm for publisher Capcom. The combat was unappealing, the platforming sections were weak, the gameplay overall a bit repetitious and simple. But ultimately? *Remember Me* wasn't a bad game. Protagonist Nilin had a genuinely intriguing, personal story and the Memory Remix sections of the game resounded with great level design and innovative ideas, it's just a shame everything started unfurl the further into the game you got – the best thing about *Remember Me* was in its rich fiction, rather than its gameplay.

Deadly Premonition
Developer: Access Games

7 Everything about *Deadly Premonition* was a bit ropey – the voice acting was ridiculous, the sound effects seemed like they were recorded in a shed with a phone, textures stuttered and struggled to load, the graphics were terrible, and the controls were abhorrent. Yet, somehow, the game attracted a loyal and fervent audience – establishing it as one of the most notable cult releases in recent years. It was like the *Twin Peaks* of gaming – for all the right reasons. We still can't decide if *Deadly Premonition* wanted to be weird, or if it was just unintentional awfulness.

Michigan: Report From Hell
Developer: Grasshopper Manufacture

8 There was a found-footage boom in Hollywood towards the end of the Naughties, yet somehow *Michigan: Report From Hell* managed to pre-empt that and establish the first completely found-footage game in 2004. Played through the point of view of a camera's viewfinder, you were tasked with unearthing the paranormal phenomenon taking place in Michigan, on behalf of fictional station ZaKa TV. The whole game looks and sounds like something you'd find on SyFy TV on repeat at 1AM, but it broke new ground, and little has been done to emulate it since.

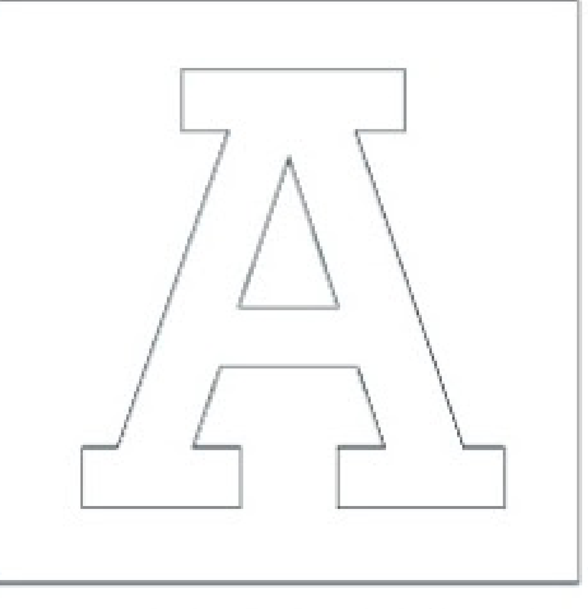
Double Switch
Developer: Digital Pictures

9 Developed by the same studio behind the likes of *Night Trap* and *Space Panic*, the game took the interactive movies of its predecessors and attempted to push them a little further – attempting to be more involving than the 'sit-back-and-watch' feeling of its peers. It sort-of worked, but the whole premise of a gang of Mafia goons searching around for an Egyptian artefact soon became more farcical than entertaining. Still, seeing a mummy wander around an old block of flats scaring Mafia hitmen makes the game a worthy experience for this list.

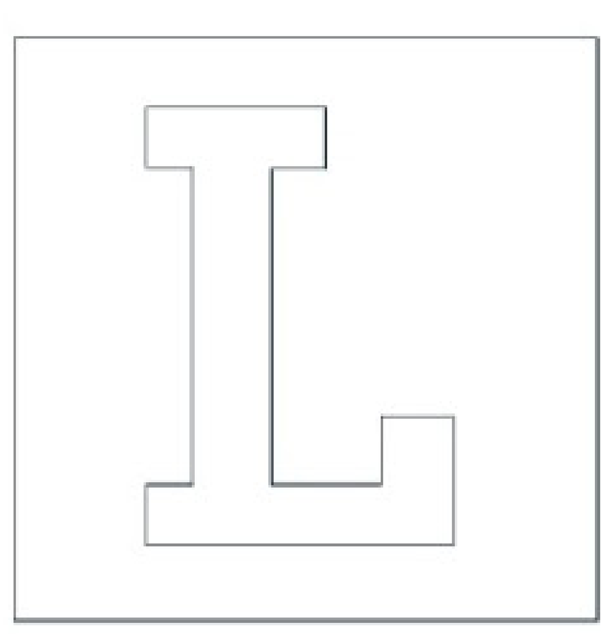
Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z
Developer: Team Ninja/Spark Unlimited

10 Brash, bullish, unintelligent and bloody. It should have been a flop, but the *Deadpool*-meets-*Dynasty Warriors* style gameplay of *Yaiba* was met with mixed reviews and didn't perform too badly, in commercial terms. Yaiba himself was a misogynist pig, and all the characters were one-dimensional and ridden with clichés. The game was flat and undynamic, the only fun coming from liberal lashings of blood oozed out by the unimaginative enemies. Despite all that, though, the game came off like a Tarantino-esque, Robert Rodriguez-flavoured zombie-romp; like *From Dusk Til Dawn* with a distinctly Japanese twist.













LG 21:9 MONITOR

MANUFACTURER: **LG** PRICE: **$1,000**

LG HAS LAUNCHED a monitor that it not only hopes will appeal to a wide variety of gamers, but will also be able to manage a range of tasks that any PC user will be able to throw at it. Utilising its full 34-inch 21:9 ratio, this truly field-of-view-filling monitor has the capacity to not only display games in a glorious amount of detail, but offers a screen space that'll be able to display a wealth of data without intruding on the game itself. You'll need to calibrate the monitor to get the purest image quality, but once done it leaves a lot to like about LG's gargantuan screen. Time will tell whether competitive gamers will adopt the unconventional monitor, or if it's something that will appeal to casual gamers wanting a more immersive experience. Unfortunately there are many games that won't work correctly, given the resolution (and few developers appear to be patching older games to work on the hardware), so don't expect all your games to run smoothly. However, those that do have the potential to look at their best.

SUPER MARIO BROS. CONVERSE ONE STAR SHOES

MANUFACTURER: **CONVERSE** PRICE: **$195**

SOMETIMES TWO BRANDS are just destined to unite. Converse has put its One Star range of shoes to good use by teaming up with Nintendo for a limited series of shoes that features Mario's iconic (Star) prize as the main image.

This series of shoes lifts its inspiration from the original game, featuring a few different flavours styled around one particular character. Of course, the red pair feature Mario in his pixel guise with the ever-elusive gold star taking the place of Converse's iconic own. Even better is the green pair: featuring Bowser on the tongue, the King Koopa will finally have his own opportunity to stamp on his enemies.

The only rub is that the shoes are only available in Japan. However, some import stores have them in stock, so if you've got a couple of hundred quid handy and need some footwear, then look no further, as these shoes are bound to get you some attention.





DIY NIXIE TUBE CLOCK KIT

If you've ever thought Artyom's wrist-wear in the *Metro* series was fetching, then now you can build your own Nixie Tube clock with the aid of a few simple ingredients and a *lot* of money.
www.thinkgeek.com/product/1615

TRAVELBOY BACKPACK

If you would much prefer to carry around your various doodads in a bag that'll likely send all those around you into a fit of nostalgia, then this glorious Game Boy-themed number, based on the original Game Boy, will certainly do the trick.
www.thinkgeek.com/product/19be



PRINCESS ZELDA

Based on *Zelda*'s appearance in *Twilight Princess*, this incredibly detailed figurine is ¼ scale and officially licenced by Nintendo. If you're looking for something pretty on your mantelpiece then look no further. The issue is that it has a price tag to match.
www.store.nintendo.co.uk/merch-figures/princess-zelda-exclusive/10949435.html



GAMING CLOTHING



BIOSHOCK INFINITE

You've been to Columbia. You've shot some guys – but have you go the t-shirt? Well fear not, because now you can get your own Columbia-themed tee.
http://www.thinkgeek.com/product/1dfb/



AIDEN CARDIGAN

Watch Dogs' protagonist Aiden didn't quite pull off the future-chic look he was going for, but now with his cardigan available to buy, you can try to do better.
www.insertcoinclothing.com/hoodies/aiden.html



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA – MEN'S HOODIE

If you've always felt like a warrior of Hyrule, but never quite had the look nailed down then rejoice! Nintendo has released this nifty *Zelda*-themed hoodie.
www.bit.ly/YHDDmw

THE LAST OF US

ARTIST: **GUSTAVO SANTAOLALLA** PRICE: **£9.49**

WITH THE RECENT release of *The Last Of Us: Remastered* on PlayStation 4, there's no better time to revisit the soundtrack that was as much part of its success as anything else in the game. Key to its success is its subversion of expected themes. For a post-apocalyptic tale painted on a broad canvas, the soundtrack opts for a sombre series of acoustic arrangements that instils an eeriness that permeates the game world. Gustavo Santaolalla focuses on the simplicity of the acoustic guitar, resulting in a lonely quality that echoes the fragility of humanity in a mutant-ravaged landscape.

Elsewhere, other tracks ramp up the tension, augmenting the haunting string arrangements with suspenseful riffs. The tracks that have the biggest impact are the quieter numbers. *All Gone (No Escape)*'s evocative use of the violin not only conveys the sadness of the world around the characters, but the inner turmoil of Joel and Ellie themselves. Santaolalla's score fills in the gap between words to tell the story in one of the year's most stirring soundtracks.



VERDICT 9/10

GAME MUSIC

ARTIST: **ANGELE DUBEAU, LA PIETA** PRICE: **£13.00**



VERDICT 8/10

A SELECTION OF old and new videogame melodies get the orchestral treatment in what is becoming a growing trend in grandiose adaptations. There should be something familiar to everyone on the track list, from the jaunty *Angry Birds* menu music to the infamous *Tetris* melody that is now likely stuck in your head merely at its mention.

The rub is that not all the choices are quite as iconic as you'd hope for a compilation album with as definitive a title as 'Game Music'. Tracks based on *Secret Of Mana* and *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Conviction* are, while performed with great gusto, a little questionable to be making an appearance next to some of the finest themes to ever grace the medium.

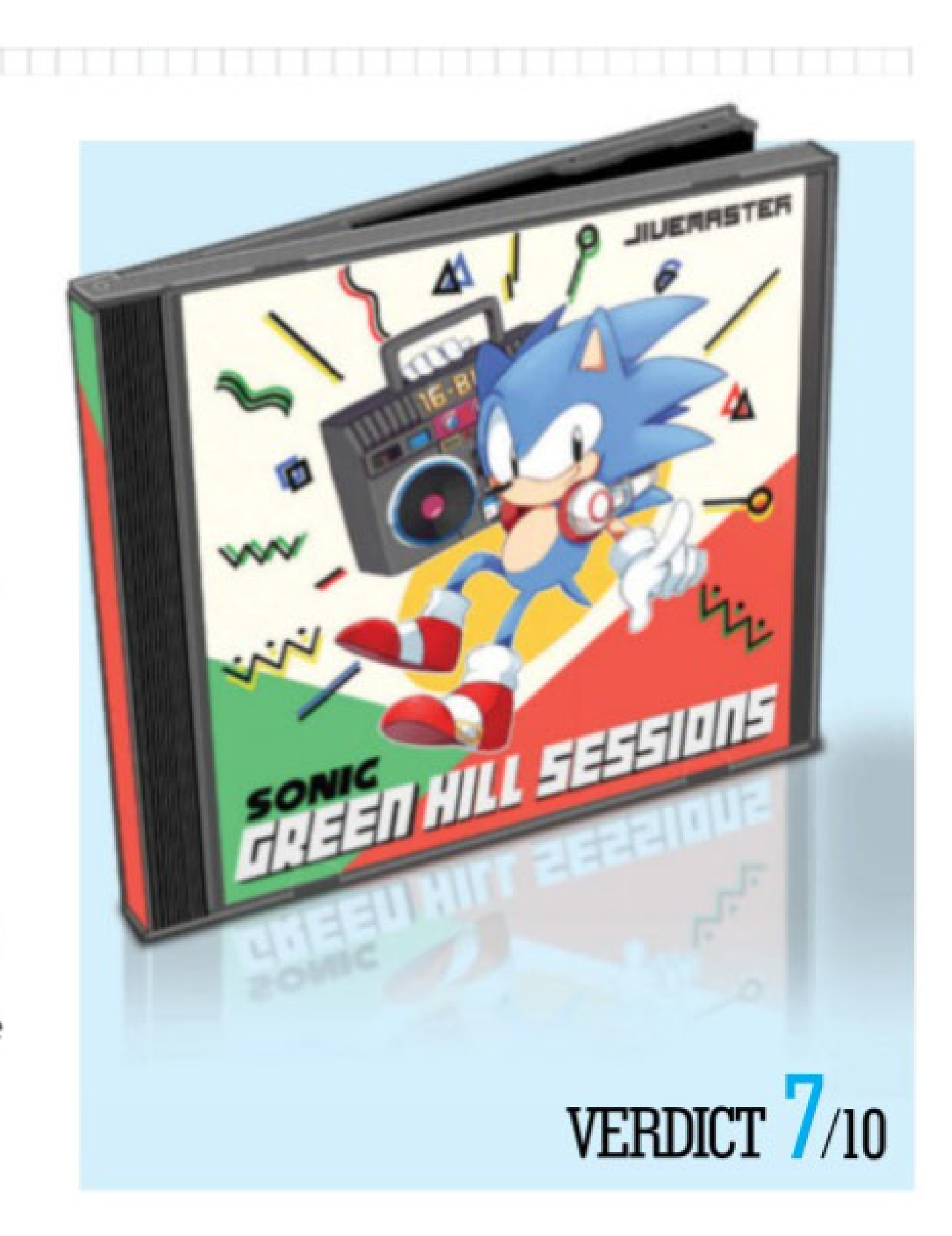
Still, what does make the list makes for near-essential listening, with some inventive arrangements and rousing interpretations of gaming's finest tunes. Even if you may not be familiar with the source, this is an engrossing compilation of videogame tracks developed and updated to truly celebrate the medium as a platform for great music.

SONIC GREEN HILL SESSIONS

MANUFACTURER: **JIVEMASTER** PRICE: **$8.99**

ONE OF THE most reverential and coherent fan tributes in quite some time, Jivemaster makes Sonic more relevant to modern gamers than any of the blue hedgehog's virtual output over the last few years. This is a collection of electronic remixes of *Sonic The Hedgehog* themes, with Jivemaster taking the familiarity of the original game soundtrack and gives it a contemporary trance-like twist. It takes every track from the original *Sonic The Hedgehog* game – from beginning to end – and remixes them into a series of breakbeat-driven synth tracks that you'd probably expect to hear in a hipster nightclub.

There's a lot to like here, eschewing just unnecessarily mashing up tracks for no good reason and instead adds to the urgency of the original themes without taking anything away from what made them work in the first place. The album is available to own for a small fee, but can also be listened to online for free, so gamers have no excuse not to give this a go.



VERDICT 7/10







THE HERO'S GUIDE TO THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE

AUTHOR: **DAVID S. J. HODGSON**
PUBLISHER: **DARK HORSE COMICS**

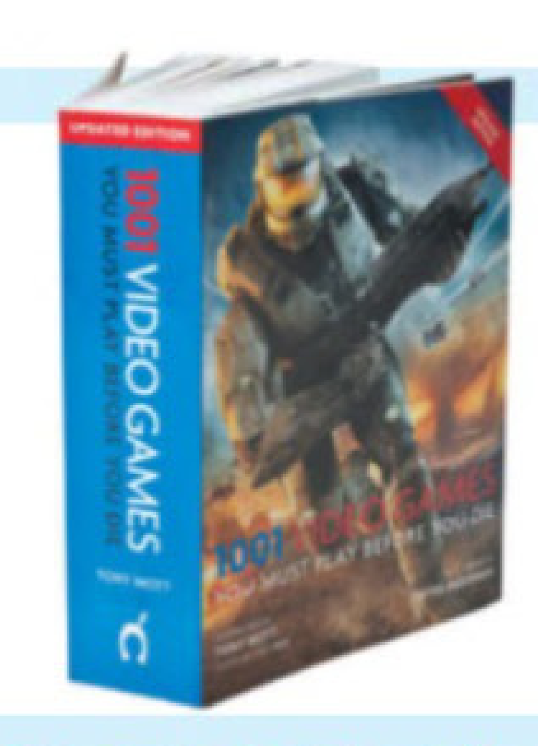
FOR THOSE THAT have yet to get lost in the world of *The Elder Scrolls Online* as much as it is for those who keep getting lost across its vast regions, this compendium of all things Tamriel delves into the fascinating fiction behind one of the most popular fantasy franchises in gaming. This isn't a mere travel guide to help signpost points of interest around Bethesda's much-hyped MMO, though. Rather, *The Hero's Guide To The Elder Scrolls Online* consists of three tomes presenting different facets of the universe.

The attention to detail on each is astounding: the first – *A Hunter's Companion* – is bound in faux-leather and features 156 original illustrations inside; the other two equally lavished in ornate detail, possessing an authentic mystique.

Each of the three books cover distinct areas of Tamriel during the Second Era. *A Hunter's Companion* covers a trek across the provinces by a group of Nord hunters in honour of the Sky Goddess Kyne; the second book covers the diverse selection of weaponry used across the ages by various races; the last delves into alchemical studios from the quill of a wizard's apprentice.

There's plenty here relevant to players – not least signposting some particular areas of interest that might hold a few secrets worth uncovering. However, even without the direct correlation to Bethesda's MMO, fans of the series will find plenty of value exploring the dense mythology of the vividly conceptualised franchise. It's not cheap and is angled at more of a collector's item than a book aimed at casual *Elder Scrolls* fans, but anyone waiting patiently for Bethesda to release its follow-up to *Skyrim* will find this a read as immersive as anything you'll find in one of the series' many virtual adventures.

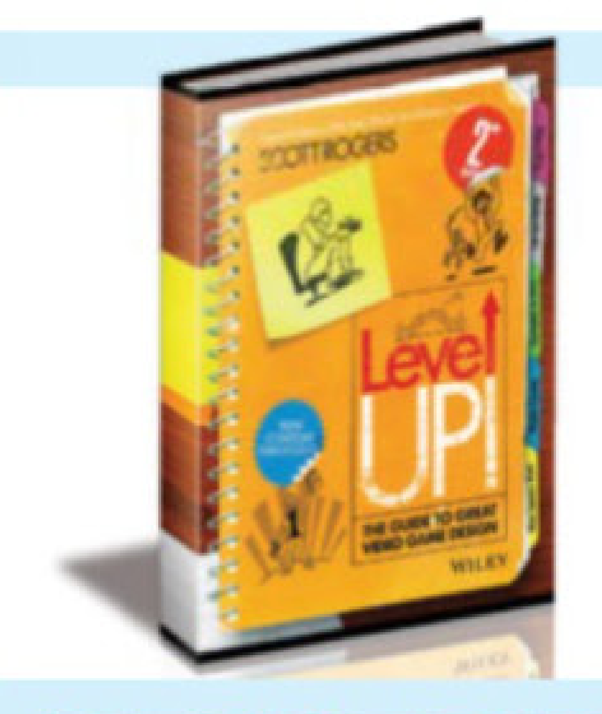
VERDICT 8/10



1001 VIDEOGAMES YOU MUST PLAY BEFORE YOU DIE

Your death is unavoidable and so are these games – all 1001 of them. While there's some questionable entries in there, overall it makes for a comprehensive checklist of some of the most important games of all time.

www.amzn.to/1rmycXc



LEVEL UP! THE GUIDE TO GREAT VIDEO GAME DESIGN

In the second edition of this coding manual, industry veteran Scott Rogers offers a guide to getting your feet in the world of game design theory. For anyone looking to break into the industry, this is a good place to start.

www.amzn.to/1BCGL29



IN REAL LIFE

A captivating tale that places its characters within the seemingly innocent world of MMO gaming and peels back the ramifications of simple gestures that affect the real-world people behind the avatars. It's an interesting concept, and definitely worth a read.

www.goodreads.com/book/show/20575446-in-real-life



Imagine Publishing Ltd
Richmond House, 33 Richmond Hill,
Bournemouth, Dorset, BH2 6EZ
☎ +44 (0) 1202 586200
Web: www.imagine-publishing.co.uk
www.gamestm.co.uk
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Magazine team

Editor In Chief Ryan King
☎ 01202 586241
Features Editor David Scarborough
Staff Writer Dom Peppiatt
Production Editor Rebecca Richards
Senior Art Editor Andy Downes
Designer John Ndojelana
Photographer James Sheppard
Publishing Director Aaron Asadi
Head of Design Ross Andrews

Contributors

Luke Albigés, Adam Barnes, Josh Barnett, Richard Cobbett, David Crookes, Jon Denton, Ian Dransfield, Erlingur Einarsson, Philippa Grafton, Jack Griffiths, Steve Holmes, Darran Jones, Rick Lane, Phillip Morris, Gray Nicholson, John Robertson, Chris Schilling, Gavin Thomas, Nick Thorpe, Paul Walker-Emig, Steve Wright

Advertising

Digital or printed media packs are available on request.
Head of Sales Hang Deretz ☎ 01202 586442
hang.deretz@imagine-publishing.co.uk
Account Manager Anthony Godsell ☎ 01202 586420
anthony.godsell@imagine-publishing.co.uk

International

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Head of International Licensing Cathy Blackman
☎ +44 (0) 1202 586401 licensing@imagine-publishing.co.uk

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Circulation

Head of Circulation Darren Pearce ☎ 01202 586200

Production

Production Director Jane Hawkins ☎ 01202 586200

Founders

Group Managing Director Damian Butt
Group Finance & Commerical Director Steven Boyd

Printing & Distribution

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